



# EGYPTIC ART

IN EARLY CHRISTIAN EGYPT

# COPTIC ART

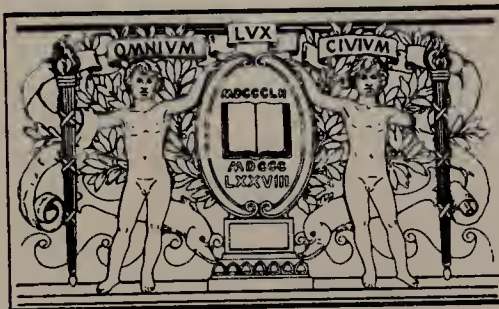
IN EARLY CHRISTIAN EGYPT

This book by Professor Klaus Wessel projects a new sharply contoured picture of Coptic Art — the art of Early Christian Egypt, when paganism was coming to an end and Christendom was preparing to assume sole mastery of the Roman Empire. Although its wide-reaching significance has long been recognized by art historians, and its stark, almost expressionistic force has delighted the layman, nevertheless Coptic Art has remained relatively unexplored. Its internal diversity, with its great variety of forms — sculpture, grave reliefs, icon paintings, splendid tapestries — as well as its styles and subjects — delicately rendered Greek deities, formidable and primitive idols, often embossed with Christian symbols — have fascinated students for years.

Here Professor Wessel offers a new and definitive analysis of the mysterious art of the Copts, and contrary to earlier theories, views it as the product of several more or less unified groups whose histories run parallel for several

*(Continued on back flap)*





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KLAUS WESSEL COPTIC ART







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BY JEAN CARROLL AND SHEILA HATTON

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## FOREWORD

While the great museums, such as those of Berlin, London, New York, Paris, Vienna and first and foremost, of course, those of Cairo and Alexandria, have collected and exhibited works of so-called Coptic art for decades, it is only now that greater interest in this still very little known field is being aroused in wider museum and collecting circles. Symptomatic of this is, to pick out only two examples, that the Münchener Ägyptische Staatssammlung is today substantially increasing its Coptic collections through the acquisition of numerous significant pieces, and that in a short time the Ikonenmuseum in Recklinghausen has brought together a small but distinguished collection of Coptic works which is currently being added to. The great touring exhibition '5000 Years of Egyptian Art', which showed amongst other things a small selection of Coptic works, played an appreciable part in bringing Coptic art to the notice of the public, and a large exhibition of Coptic, Nubian and Ethiopian art is being planned. Moreover Coptic works of often surprising importance are reaching the art market in larger numbers than ever before, and finding enthusiastic buyers.

These facts are not casually mentioned. They are the justification for this book, which attempts to give to those who have become aware of Coptic art, a picture of its nature, growth and significance. Much must unfortunately remain fragmentary today — and will perhaps always remain so — and the reader will, I hope, understand why without having to have it analysed and explained here. Hardly anyone in German universities is knowledgeable on Coptic art. It has not yet been deemed worthy of being made a subject of the Alma Mater. My connection with it was established because for eight years I was in charge of the Early Christian-Byzantine collection of the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, with its rich collection of Coptic sculpture, and I was therefore obliged when working on the necessary guides and catalogues to attempt to understand its nature. After moving to Munich I got to know the old collections and the new acquisitions of the Egyptian State Collections. Their Keeper, Professor Dr Hans Wolfgang Müller, was a great inspiration to me. He not only discussed with me all new acquisitions, thus allowing me to take full part in the pleasures of museum work, he also put forward joint projects concerning the archaeology and art of the Copts, which we pursued through several sessions. I owe much new knowledge and clarification to these projects. It was furthermore through his good offices that I was given the opportunity of writing the Coptic section of the catalogue for the exhibition '5000 Years of Egyptian Art' in Zürich and Essen, and he recommended me to the Ikonenmuseum of the town of Recklinghausen, when it requested an expert assessment of the nucleus of its present Coptic collection. This assessment led to the compilation of the catalogue for this collection. Thus I became

increasingly absorbed in Coptic art. For enabling me in this way to realize my long-standing ambition to write a work on the subject, I am indebted in the first place to Hans Wolfgang Müller. Heinz Skrobucha, Custodian of the Ikonenmuseum of the town of Recklinghausen, approached the publishing firm of Aurel Bongers; they, recognizing the possibilities of such a book, immediately fell in with the plan. These two men, my colleagues and friends, I thank especially! I thank the publishers for their courage in taking on the risky venture of bringing out this book, and for their unfailing support.

My sincere thanks are due to many of my colleagues for their help in supplying the illustrations. As a token of my appreciation I should like to mention Mrs Maria Cramer (Münster/Westf.), Mrs Elizabeth Riefstahl (South Essex, Mass.), and Messrs R. P. Pierre du Bourguet S. J. (Paris), John D. Cooney (Brooklyn, N.Y.), Hans Wolfgang Müller (Munich), who placed his own records at my disposal, Rudolf Noll (Vienna), Marcel Restle (Munich), and Günter Ristow (Sürth), as well as the Museum of Fine Arts (Boston), the British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum (London), the Metropolitan Museum (New York) and the Dumbarton Oaks Collection (Washington).

KLAUS WESSEL

## AN IMAGINARY MUSEUM OF COPTIC ART

If it were possible to gather together a museum of Coptic art from existing public and private collections, it could contain works of such an extraordinarily wide variety of shape and form that their different styles would be difficult to grasp. In it one might show contrasting examples next to one another which would be very attractive, but, to judge by their characteristics at least, would hardly give the impression that here were artistic works and handicrafts gathered together from the same sphere. To confine ourselves to sculpture for the moment, such an imaginary museum would acquire, for example, a relief in the art market which shows the bust of a young woman. The finely chiselled face with its rather small chin, the well-formed mouth with very full lips, the narrow, long, straight nose, the blank eyes under gently arched brows, is indeed somewhat lacking in expression, but undoubtedly modelled in a strong Hellenistic tradition. The fashionable coiffure is not portrayed in the best way technically possible in antique sculpture; the strands of hair are too thick and give the effect of cord, and the plaits, which fall on the shoulders in the Egyptian manner, two on each side, are coarsely twisted like rope, but the general impression is only slightly marred. The lady is wearing a diadem, the bands of which hang down on the breast, earrings, and a necklace of ancient Egyptian style. Her dress, probably a *stola*, has a v-neck with a rolled border; the breasts show clearly through the material, only the pleating of the *stola* on and between them is very unnatural and purely ornamental. All in all, therefore, a portrait of a woman of the antique school, extremely natural (observe the wrinkles in her neck!) and pretty, fashionable and distinguished, the picture of a lady of high rank. It may be assigned to the third century AD. The subject is certainly a member of an elegant and rich society, and so is hardly a native Copt, therefore probably a Greek; if a personal portrait is not intended here, it may well be the female embodiment of a district or a town, depicted in the costume of the time.

Plate 1

Next to this lady one might place the relief of a town-goddess, which reached Berlin from the Cairo art market. Here also a woman is portrayed, but how completely different she looks! The face is broad and short, the mouth set sullenly, the upper lip is hardly indicated, and the bottom lip is pushed poutingly forward; the eyebrows are lowered in an angry and sceptical manner, and run in awkward and vapid curves so that their lowest point lies somewhere just above the pupil of the giant eye. This eye has a quite unnatural shape, with the lower lid drawn deeply down, the pupils — simple drillholes — lie closely under the upper lid so that the goddess appears to be squinting out from under her eyebrows; the outer corners of her eyes are drawn up into sharp points; perhaps this is a no longer wholly understood memory of the ancient Egyptian custom of lengthening the corners of the eyes to the temples with broad strokes of cosmetic. This woman appears to be hard, evil or angry, unpleasing and in no way beautiful. Her coiffure, upon which rests the town-goddess's turreted crown, is composed of several rows

Plate 2



of very coarsely rendered ringlets, which hang down loosely at the nape of her neck. The neck wrinkles form a hard triangle, with the apex pointing downwards. Her dress appears to be entirely composed of curved triangles fastened together like pointed patches, giving the impression of a harlequin's or court jester's clothing; these are probably meant to represent the folds of the dress; and the bust is indicated by a pair of curves placed too far apart. The neck-opening is adorned with a necklace of large discs, from which hang two crescents and a trefoil. There is nothing antique here, apart from the representation of a woman crowned with battlements as the goddess of a town; the forms are reminiscent rather of the art of the desert metropolis, Palmyra, or of southern Arabia. Formerly this relief was dated to the sixth/seventh century, for no sound reason; its stylistic connections lead one rather to conjecture that it is not so very far removed in time from the Greek lady, though intrinsically they are poles apart. The one represents an attempt to fashion a timeless beautiful female countenance in the antique manner, an attempt which has succeeded very well; the other, an alarming idol of forbidding crudeness of form and expression. This town-goddess — about whom we know little and who is not fully explained — still has something of the awe-inspiring divinity, the *numen tremendum* of a religiosity which takes itself seriously. One could well imagine that this relief once decorated the gateway of a town, to frighten away possible foes and to show them that this town was under the protection of a harsh and pitiless goddess. By contrast, the Greek woman appears very human in her beauty and her fashionable vanity — though her expressionless exterior lacks any intimation of the divine as well as all enchantment.

Just as we have compared two contrasting spiritual worlds so we may also place next to one another in the same way in our imaginary museum, two funerary stelae of the same fundamental type which come from the same Egyptian district of the predominantly Greek-colonized Faiyum. Both show a woman praying under an arch. Both women are

Plate 3 Christians, as is shown by the inscription EN-IPHNH (in peace) on the Leningrad stele

Plate 4 and by the *ankh*-sign with Alpha and Omega on the one from Berlin. But how great is the difference in the modelling! It is not the frame which is decisive — the shape of the arcade, or *aedicula*, is depicted in various ways in the region of the Faiyum — but the presentation of the figures. The matron of Leningrad stands in the antique pose, the leg which takes her weight and the one which is bent are clearly defined. The slightly curved carriage of the lady is elegant, the flow of pleats natural; the face, under hair which is covered by a veil, is executed economically but well. The Rhodia figure by contrast has a lumpish appearance; from below the dress the thin legs with their tiny feet hang down, and from the sides the meagre arms stretch out (the hands are broken off). Her face is scarcely indicated (the line of the mouth is the result of deliberate damage by a museum visitor); it is balanced on an over-long, very thin neck, and is surrounded with a peculiar circular festoon, which is intended to depict the cloak drawn up over the head. The dress is divided by deeply indented lines into various broad strips,



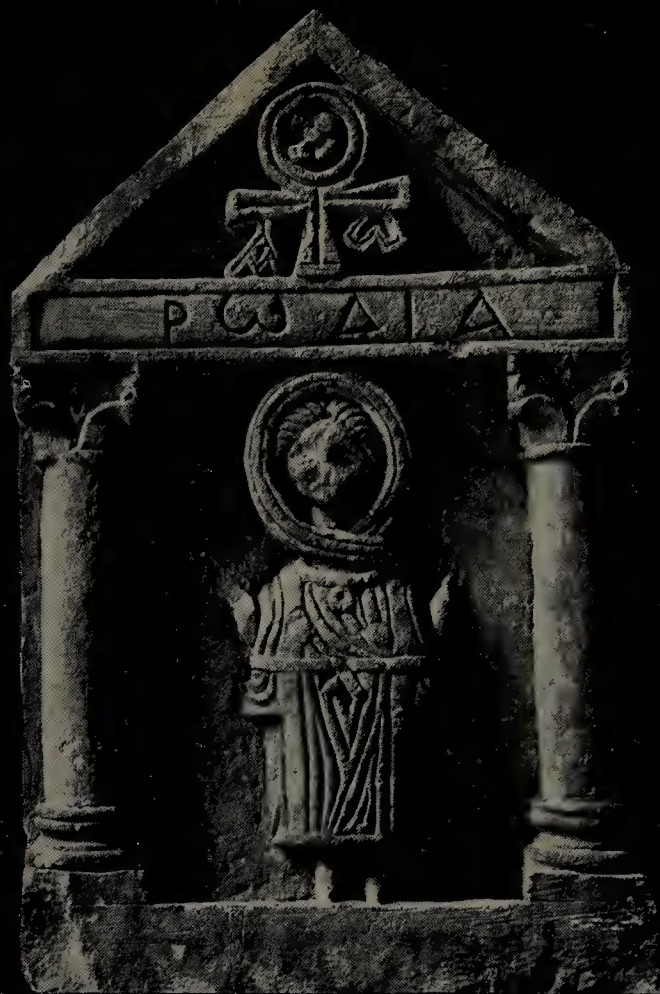
1 Bust of a young woman.  
Limestone relief



2 Bust of a town-goddess.  
Limestone relief









which are intended to indicate the folds. The *bullae* of thick rope and a kind of tie-girdle decorate the robe. It is scarcely credible that such an abstract work could originate from the same country which produced the antique-style lady from Leningrad. The departure from the antique could hardly be more radical. Were one to regard the Leningrad matron, for all its isolated crudeness of form and its lack of proportion, as a piece of provincial Greek sculpture, then the stele of Rhodia is completely outside such a classification. It no longer has anything in common with antique art forms, and its abstract primitiveness gives it a purely medieval appearance. This is all the more striking, as the architectural framework of the Berlin stele is appreciably more accurately worked in the antique manner than the Leningrad piece, almost as though the sculptor wanted in this way to underline still more the novelty of his figure.

Let us set beside it two statuettes. One of them, now in Cairo, represents a youth Plate 7 wearing a *pallium* over his tunic. The proportions are all wrong, yet his posture is well caught. Here again the bent leg protrudes through the robes, and the folds flow naturally.

The head, with its very individual face, is without doubt a portrait. The skill of the sculptor has been concentrated on this part. The treatment of the eyes and mouth is a little reminiscent of the ancient Egyptian portraits of the Amarna period; the subject appears to have Egyptian blood in his veins, even though the sculptor must have been Greek. The statuette belongs at the latest to the third century, but it could also be placed as early as the second. Its counterpart is in Recklinghausen. Plate 8

The stiff, quite unproportioned figure in an ill-defined dress has a mask-like sparingly modelled, arrogant face, and long hair adorned with a net at the back of the head; even the sex cannot be readily determined.

It is as far removed from the antique as it could be, and reminds one of a primitive idol. Everything is reduced to a few quite abstract forms, with no resemblance to human likeness. Nevertheless this statuette is hardly earlier than the antique one. Between antique art and this work yawns an unbridgeable gulf. But it is not caused by distance in time but by a completely different artistic standpoint. We might conjecture that this is the work of a Copt who was intrinsically so far removed from the classical antique that he did not even attempt to imitate its art-forms. But he succeeded in producing a work of genuine, original and powerful archaism. Further instructive differences would become apparent were we to place beside these two a group of three expressing purely antique themes. First, an unfortunately very damaged relief from Ahnas, now in Cairo, Plate 9

which portrays Herakles as the slayer of a lion, flanked by two Victories, of which, certainly, only the one on the right is connected with him. The piece appears to have come from a frieze, as the left-hand Victory is turned towards the left where doubtless a further labour of the hero is depicted. Herakles is portrayed, except for a little cloak slung over his left arm, in heroic nudity; the Victory is apparently wearing a tunic and *pallium*. The forms of this relief are not entirely characteristic of the antique. Thus,

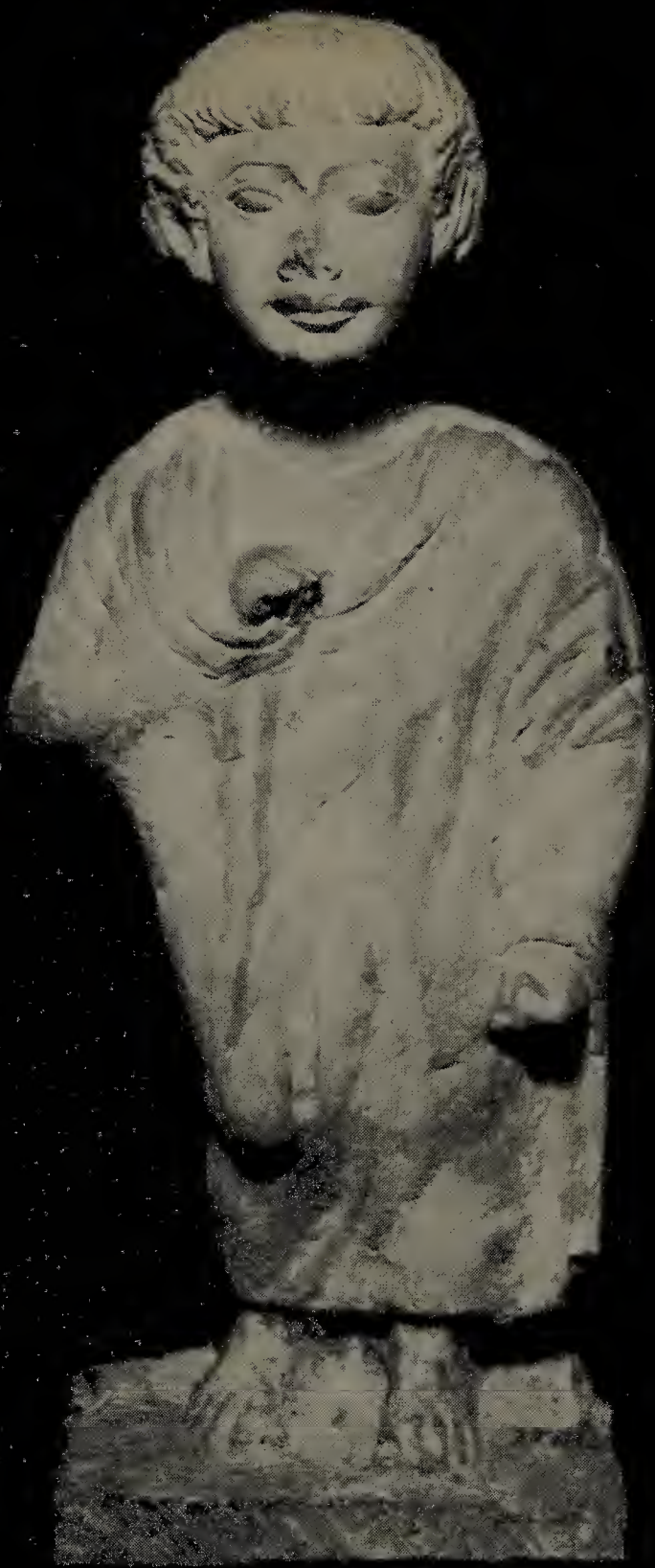
- 3 Praying woman. Limestone funerary stele from the Faiyum
- 4 Praying woman (Rhodia). Limestone funerary stele from Kom Buljeh, Faiyum
- 5 Mary nursing her Child. Painted limestone relief from Medinet el-Faiyum
- 6 Mary nursing her Child. Limestone relief from the Faiyum

for example, the hero's muscles are very crudely suggested; his body is lean and appears to be constructed like a geometrical figure, not however following natural forms. The folds on the Victory's robe are strictly parallel, and unnaturally arranged, and she stands in an affected dancing pose. The proportions nowhere agree exactly. Yet in this relief of a deed of valour by the *heros eponymos* (name-giving hero) of the town of Herakleopolis Magna, the modern Ahnas, and once the leading town of the Herakleopolitan district, one senses the pains taken by the sculptor to convey the ancient myth in what was, for him, a suitable form. The style here in evidence is characteristic of the early transitional themes of the Greek myths on the representational sculpture of Herakleopolis Magna. Also it is clearly — the town having been predominantly occupied by Greeks — a provincial late antique degeneration from the eastern antique, far removed inwardly and outwardly from the style of the Greek late antique, representing nevertheless a special trend in the furthest provinces, perhaps influenced by the Near East, and with nothing in common with the Egyptian. From the same town comes a relief, also

Plate 10 now in Cairo, which shows two figures struggling with animals. The relief, mostly on two planes, depicts jostling figures with large leaves interposed, and is completely different in style from the Herakles fragment. Natural forms are much reduced, but the movement is well observed. This relief manifests a mentality quite unlike that which gave rise to the Herakles fragment. The density of the design covering the base, the very flat relief, and the theme are reminiscent of a Roman sarcophagus of the third century. One is tempted to assume the influence of late antique Roman artistic practice here. And one could imagine that this frieze perhaps originated from a building which was erected by Roman officials or soldiers in the town of Herakles. So next to an individual provincial Greek relief is placed an artistically very feeble provincial Roman work. Up to now there has been a tendency to date the Herakles fragment to the fifth or sixth century, the hunting scene, on the other hand, to the sixth. Both datings are obviously based simply on the false standard of artistic 'remoteness' in style from the antique. It is hardly conceivable that, in the fifth century, when the Nile Valley was already predominantly Christian, a great frieze in honour of the town hero could still be produced. And it is just as improbable that a Roman theme of the third century belonging to the East Roman empire should have appeared again 300 years later in far-off Egypt. We shall have to place both pieces in the third or fourth century. These demonstrate to us the possibilities of artistic expression in one town; now we will take yet another relief which is today

Plate 11 in Berlin, but whose provenance is not known. It shows a struggle of a man on horseback with a spear against a lion; a decoy lies between them with its legs in the air. If one did not know that the relief originated in Egypt and is worked in Egyptian limestone, one might, judging from its style, take it equally well for Lombard or other early medieval work from the Western world. Here simplification of form has been pushed to its limit, and the childlike approach is actually rather touching. It embodies folk art in the fullest sense of the word; the attempt by a village stonemason to depict the victory of good





7 Youth. Limestone statuette



8 Standing figure. Limestone statuette







over evil in the age-old image of the battle with a lion. This concept is at home in the East. It was also, however, taken over by Christendom, the lion being also a symbol of Satan (*I Pet.* 5,8). Whether a pagan or a Christian was at work here, we do not know. Equally we do not know where this relief may have originated. It evades all dating in its timeless primitiveness. For us, however, it is extreme evidence of the possibilities and the dangers that can exist in endeavouring to come to any definite conclusions in respect of some pieces of the late antique style in Egypt.

Let us now pass to the sphere of Christian art in the Nile Valley; we would enrich our imaginary museum of Coptic art with two examples of the Virgin suckling her Child (the so-called *Galaktophorousa* or *Maria lactans*). The one which came to the Berlin Museum from Medinet el-Faiyum is simply incised. With a few bold strokes it depicts a charming picture of the young Mother suckling the naked Child. Ample remains of the former painting that completed the incised design can be seen, so that the relief is hardly more than a sketch which lays down the main lines. A long line of prototypes lies behind this deeply sensitive, earliest picture of the nursing Mother of God, notably the Isis statuettes of the Hellenic period. The creative blending of Egyptian religious feeling and Greek form has produced a type which a Christian artist in the Greek Faiyum has here claimed for the Mother of God. Simple as the design is, the artist nevertheless knows how to embody his theme in it. At a time when Early Christian art in general only knew the solemn pictures of the Madonna in Majesty, an Egyptian Greek has succeeded in creating an utterly human picture, moving in its simple intimacy, of the Virgin Mother with her Divine Child. That this theme can also be transformed into devotional and majestic pictures, and thus placed beyond the reach of simple believers, is shown by another relief from the Faiyum which is now in Cairo. Here the incised lines are confined to the inner part of the design of the otherwise two-dimensional relief. The Madonna is enthroned, stiff and upright, between drawn-back draperies. No less stiff is the Child in her arms. Quite indifferently she gives the suckling the left breast (which is moreover completely unanatomically placed and leaves one guessing as to how it actually comes out of the garment). Like royal bodyguards or court chamberlains two little worshippers stand beside the stately Mother of God. The artistic difference is very great and the difference in time uncertain, because the two works have so far not been firmly dated. But the intrinsic difference in spirit of the two representations, similar as far as their contents are concerned, is decisive. On the one hand a moving picture of humanity, on the other a stern devotional work; there an echo of Hellenistic art, here a characteristic beginning of medieval conceptions; there sweetness, here majesty; there we witness the deep relationship between Mother and Child, here a Queen is represented as Mother of the Lord. The relief from Medinet el-Faiyum is a beautiful testimony to a joyful piety; its counterpart, an attempt at a lofty expression of a submissive religiosity worshipping the divine majesty.

Plate 5

Plate 6

Of quite a different order, again, is the contrast between two reliefs of the Egyptian national saint, Menas. One, in the Museum of Alexandria, which comes from the ruins of the Thecla Monastery near Dedehele, may well be a copy of the cult figure in the crypt of the Menas shrine in the Alexandrian desert. It shows the same type that we also know from countless earthenware flasks (which would have been taken away from the Menas shrine as pilgrim souvenirs), as well as ivory carvings. The saint stands as a worshipper, in a belted tunic and a *chlamys*, between two kneeling camels. As the prototype can be dated to the early fifth century this copy must be later; it may however belong to the same century. The sculptor was still master of antique balance in his figure, of correct proportioning and of a certain elegance of pose. The folds of the garments are very close, roughly parallel, but flowing naturally. The face has little individuality, being very reminiscent in its form and its coronet of ringlets, of pagan works from the Greek towns in the Nile Valley. The camels are well observed, even the stupid, proud expression of their faces is, in the right-hand one, brought out to a certain extent.

Plate 13 The counterpart to this is in Vienna; its provenance is unknown, the theme is the same, except that two appreciably smaller male figures (priests?) have been brought in, and all is enclosed in an arcade. The essential difference between these two reliefs is the absolute stiffness, the almost idol-like rigidity of this piece; its unnaturalness and the great reduction of the forms to a summary geometrical line structure. Though it can hardly be more than fifty years later than the other, it represents a completely different ruling principle of art.

Plate 14 In late antique Egypt many saints are portrayed riding on horseback. A mounted saint of this type, whom we cannot name, came to the Cairo Museum from Akhmin, the ancient Panopolis, that is to say, from the neighbourhood of a Greek settlement in the region of Thebes. Against a background of leaves and fruit rides the saint, dressed in a tunic and *chlamys*, holding a sprig in his raised right hand. The face is turned towards the observer and a halo surrounds the curly head. It was no great artist who carved this relief, but he has sought to reproduce his mounted saint in the antique manner. True, the proportions are not correct, the folds of the garment are very crudely scored in, and there is no attempt to work out the details, but we cannot close our ears to a last echo of the antique style. A portrayal of the mounted Christ, now in Berlin, came from Der Amba Schenoute almost opposite Achmim on the other side of the Nile. Guided by two angels, He sits upon what is perhaps meant to be a mule, riding side-saddle with the upper part of His body turned towards the observer, His right hand raised in blessing. His very ill-defined clothing appears to consist of a tunic and *pallium*. One can no longer detect anything of the antique here. The Saviour's countenance has the appearance of prehistoric metal-work: upon the oval of the face the shape of a lotus flower has been laid, representing the forehead and nose; the eyelids are incised, the tear ducts join up with the eyebrows into a circle like giant spectacles; the mouth consists of two crescents laid one above the other, the long hair hangs like rectangular beads. The faces of the angels

Plate 15



12 St Menas. Marble relief from  
the ruins of the Thecla monastery,  
near Dechele



13 St Menas. Marble relief









are similarly abstract. The robes of all three figures are divided into uniform broad bands by deeply notched lines and it is nowhere clear how they are actually arranged. The surface is here shaped without any consideration for realism in the appearance of the garments. An incised inner line follows the contours of the rider's mount. In this relief all antique principles have been relinquished; this is also shown by the definite two-layered design. The sculptor from Panopolis was trying to produce a work in the antique manner, even though he was not completely successful. Here in the Coptic monastery was a man working in a manner far removed from the antique and completely uninfluenced by it, who was certainly a Copt, as was the sculptor from Panopolis, and just as certainly a descendant of the Greeks.

It is hard to imagine greater differences. They have parallels, however, in the sphere of Christian art in the Nile Valley. For example, there is in the Berlin Museum a silver votive cross, which a nun, Theodote, subject to the Abbess Mannu, donated to the Abbot Schenoute. The persons named all appear to be Copts and the inscriptions are in the Coptic language. The piece would seem to date from the early seventh century. The crucified Christ is very delicately engraved; the picture is after an original known to us as an example of the art of the Constantinople goldsmiths. On the arms of the cross, executed in a simpler but equally well-known manner, are medallions with an Archangel, Mary and John, and at the base of the cross the standing figure of the donor with candles in her hands. At a time when a renaissance in the grand style of antique portraiture was once again being attempted in Constantinople, this masterly work was created in Egypt; it reflects the mature artistic development of the imperial capital, and one can hardly believe it to be other than an engraved work from there. At about the same time an engraver also attempted the theme of the Crucifixion. He made the mould for a medallion, which is to be seen in the Brooklyn Museum. His representation follows a pattern that we know well from leaden flasks from the Holy Land, but he has reduced his figures to little matchstick forms. The picture of the cross with the head of Christ on it between the crucified thieves and the soldiers drawing lots for Christ's robe, has been made into an almost abstract design, the meaning lost unless one knows the originals.

Yet another comparison from the sphere of human portraiture makes clearer this contrast between the echo of the antique and the representative work from Constantinople on the one hand, and the individual styles of modelling followed by the Copts on the other. From a monastery on the Red Sea, about which, unfortunately, nothing more is known, came two pilaster capitals, which are now in Recklinghausen, and which are more or less contemporaneous. One of them shows, placed near the boss, the very well modelled bust of an emperor, perhaps Tiberius II (AD 578 - 582), which follows the Constantinople style; the other a mask of uncertain meaning and sex. In fundamental pattern both capitals are about the same, even though the representation of the acanthus leaves differs. But these two faces belong to different worlds. The head of the emperor may not be a true portrait, but it is full of life. The mask on the other hand is much

*Plate 16*

*Plate 17*

*Plate 18*

*Plate 20*

nearer in style to the mounted Christ from Der Amba Schenoute, than it is to its counterpart. It simplifies the natural forms to memorized formulas. If we detect here a renaissance of antique style, then it carries us on to the Middle Ages and anticipates the patterns of Merovingian sculpture.

Similar borderline cases could be established also in the case of animal sculpture.

- Plate 21* In the Cairo Museum we find the representation of a reclining ram. Much about it is clearly late antique, such as the representation of the fleece like pointed leaves and the human eyes in its face. But the sculptor who carved this ram has nevertheless produced a very natural picture of the animal. He stylizes the details, certainly, but not the general impression. In contrast there is in Berlin a crouching lion — it is one of a pair of identical gate guardians — which is the absolute antithesis of such stylized yet life-like animals: here everything is represented in a completely cubist manner. In scarcely any respect does it resemble the king of beasts anatomically, but the impression of the dangerous beast of prey who furiously bares his teeth, his mighty strength, his readiness to spring, in short the essence of a lion is convincingly brought out. Like a strange fetish, like a terrifying animal-idol, this menacing lion is in its way a masterpiece full of suspense and of strange artistic power. The sculptor who fashioned the vase-stand for the monastery at Saqqara and made the middle support with the outlet in the form of a lion's head, worked in quite a different way however. If we did not know of a whole series of prior steps leading up to this head, we would hardly be able to identify this animal mask with certainty. It is worked out in an entirely decorative manner; from below curving lines swing upwards, one on top of the other, and enclose two parabolic spaces, each containing a shell-shaped leaf, into which in turn the lines immediately surrounding it enter and form spirals; in the centre is a circular piece with spaces for eyes and a nose laid on it; similar lines surround the eyes, and on this circular piece is set eccentrically a further circle with the round outlet hole from which a pointed tongue protrudes; two additional pointed pieces hang down behind it. Any animal likeness is here completely lost, it is decoration of a spirited yet obscure kind, essentially divested of meaning and transformed into a grotesque. Similar differences can be established in cast bronze utensils in animal form. For example, Recklinghausen has a lamp in the form of a dove, from Sheikh Abada, (ancient Antinoe or Antinoopolis). Once again everything is greatly simplified, but a living picture is formed. The sculptor has caught beautifully the movement of the head as it turns, giving the bird an appealingly naturalistic air. Only the transformation of the tail into two wick-holders shows the practical purpose of this little animal statuette. A lamp in the form of a peacock, now in Dumbarton Oaks, is in an entirely different style. Here the form of the bird is only very superficially imposed on the body of the lamp. The wings are ornamental scales, the eyes of the tail-feathers simple incised circles, the feathers embellishing the head a three-lobed symbol reminiscent of a heraldic lily. The tail is transformed into a six-sided blunt pyramid, the feet are no longer represented, and in their place appears a round stepped base. The Recklinghausen lamp makes genuinely
- Plate 22*
- Plate 23*
- Plate I*
- Plate 19*





6 The Crucifixion, with a picture of the donor.  
Silver votive cross of Theodote

7 The Crucifixion.  
Stone mould for a medallion







18 Limestone capital of a pilaster with the bust of an emperor and eagles.  
From a monastery on the Red Sea

19 Peacock. Bronze lamp



20 Limestone capital of a pilaster  
with a garlanded bust. From  
monastery on the Red S







21 Limestone relief of a reclining ram

22 Limestone statuette of a lion



23 Limestone jar stand with a lion mask, from the monastery of Saqqara





full use of the animal form; that in Dumbarton Oaks, by contrast, uses it only as decoration, and only to embellish the body of the lamp.

A last, very important and extensive sphere of Coptic sculpture should be briefly touched on in the building-up of our imaginary museum, and that is ornamental carving. In this lies the particular strength, the greatest and most fruitful wealth of late antique art in Egypt. In view of what we have so far considered, the artistic value of this art cannot be rated very highly when measured against the antique, to the latest expressions of which much of it belongs. A certain strange, genuine Coptic element alone stands out from it with individual, un-antique values, and shows us a completely different artistic spirit of astonishing and strange power. It is in the sphere of ornamental carving, however, whether it has a botanic origin or a geometric style, that so-called Coptic art has accomplished something really grand and lasting — even if it is hardly creative and drew its inspiration from all around.

Most of the purely ornamental art has an architectural connection, and once decorated funerary buildings, churches, monasteries or the richer private houses and public buildings. Only in rare instances do we know the source of the fragments which have come down to us. But their inventiveness is very impressive. For example, upon a long frieze — one could imagine it once decorating the outer walls of a monastery, as some we know from Bawit — there unfolds in regular curves a double branch, accompanied by acanthus leaves. This branch is lively and vigorous, and was once coloured. It descends directly from the antique style. If one places next to this piece from Recklinghausen a frieze such as that from Bawit, now in the Louvre, one is faced with a different, more ascetic convention, despite the over-all similarity of pattern. What is decisive about it is not that the very thin double branches flow in much steeper waves, and that they form themselves into complete circles, but primarily the much more abstract, cold and hard forms of the acanthus leaves. Here one feels no swelling life, but a cool mathematical construction of great clarity. A scarcely less contrived example of such an architectural frieze of quite a different nature is shown by a limestone slab in Recklinghausen, which is built up in a severely symmetrical manner. It makes use of the patterns originating in Sassanian Iran, albeit in a much scantier form than is customary there. The boughs become garlands, the acanthus leaves are pushed to the edges, other very abstract plant forms come in, similar to grapes and vine leaves. These three examples may not be very far apart in time; in their fundamental structure and their relation to natural forms they are widely separated.

*Plate 24*

*Plate 26*

On pilasters, too, we find many and greatly varying ornamental designs. Thus, for example, a piece which probably comes from Bawit, and is now in Berlin, shows a variation on the age-old theme of the Greek key pattern, rendered with extraordinary exactness and beauty; the squares in the middle are filled with flowers in the shape of a cross, and, in one instance only, with an acanthus trefoil. This motif is probably oriental in its origin; but examples are also found in Greek ornamental art. The deeply cut spaces

*Plate 27*

between the raised carving which give a dense shadow effect are characteristic of late antique art in Egypt. The same technique appears on another pilaster, also now in Berlin, which was acquired in the Cairo art market. Out of a two-handled vase grows a severely symmetrical pattern of sharply indented acanthus leaves; finer acanthus fronds, likewise sharply indented, fill the background on each side of the vase; only in a few places can one still see that all the leaves were given a finely carved inner pattern, so that it did not give such a silhouetted appearance as today; the vase was also richly fluted. Even though the botanical forms are forced into a strictly unnatural design, and much as one feels the artificial construction of this carved panel, its origin as well as its meaning nevertheless remain closely connected with the living world of nature, in contrast to the piece from Bawit, which makes use of geometrical forms in a masterly manner.

In carved capitals, which provide extremely important evidence of how sculpture was bound up with architecture, we find similar contrasts. For example, a two-zone capital reached the Berlin Museum from the Cairo art market, which in its type and style is very similar to examples from Bawit, though its provenance is unknown. The lower part is made in the form of a basket-capital. It is surrounded by a very regular, simply constructed row of vines, with small sharply cut leaves and detailed bunches of grapes approximately in the middle. This clear and symmetrical carving is for the most part worked *à jour*, that is, raised from the background and only connected with it by strips. This gives a very deep shadow effect. A line of bead-and-disc pattern separates this basket-capital from the upper zone, which shows crouching lions at the corners, and in the middle, on the boss, a laurel wreath with a richly decorated cross and underneath it a simple x (the Greek Chi, the first letter of Christ's name). The work is very precise, and with the lions an attempt is even made to give a picture which is to a certain extent naturalistic, even though this aim has not been achieved. The method of employing animal figures or heads in the capital, and the clear and sharply cut *à jour* carving both originate in the eastern late antique. The true home of the new ornamental carving of capitals appears to have been Constantinople, although it is true everything from there looks very different, being much more detailed and delicate; nevertheless the effort to follow the capital

city is undeniable. What may result from this is shown by a two-zone capital in Recklinghausen, in which the lower part is represented simply as a plaited basket, while the corners are decorated with birds that we cannot identify, and in the place of bosses, little trees or slender crosses appear. The piece comes from Sheikh Abada. Obviously the fashion is being followed, but the art of the capital and that of the provinces are poles apart. The animal forms are so abstract that one is almost reminded of the cubist lions in Berlin. The heavy foliate decoration has given way to the plaited basket. In the place of great accuracy we have a crooked, almost careless design. Nevertheless the two capitals are approximately contemporaneous. It is not only that there is a difference in craftsmanship, in the so-called quality of the work, as the careless execution of the capital from Antinoe would suggest. It would seem, rather, that here a Greek town has emerged



from the surrounding Coptic world within the stream of the abstract un-antique artistic conception, while in the predominantly Coptic monastery of Bawit the style of the capital city is taken very seriously, without however reaching such artistic heights and precision. In this early Byzantine ornamental carving and column capitals there is little of the antique remaining; instead, there is much more oriental influence from Byzantium, so that we see in the capital in Berlin, especially in the lions, antique formulas being interpreted — for without the numerous Roman representations of lions these lions on



I Dove. Bronze lamp from Sheikh Abada

the capital would be absolutely unimaginable. Here the tables are turned: the piece from the Greek state looks more Coptic than the one from the Coptic monastery, which could well stand beside early Byzantine work.

We know from Bawit that besides completely antique acanthus capitals that cannot be dealt with further here, yet another capital form was very popular, a form that also often appears at Saqqara. We select for our imaginary museum an example from this monastery which is today in the Cairo Museum. It is a simple basket-capital evenly covered with a three-banded, large-meshed looped design; the meshes are filled with finely detailed vine leaves with two stems which unite. The relief is not very high, but

Plate 32

extraordinarily finely worked, clear and almost mathematically constructed. Nevertheless the botanical forms are very naturalistically rendered. All this is strongly reminiscent of ornamental carving from Sassanian Persia. From the same source also came the custom, which is taken over here, of binding together the threefold bands at their point of contact with each other with a kind of ribbed sheath or a triple binding. To compare with this let us take a two-zone capital from Der Mawas, now in Recklinghausen. It consists of a lower part in the form of a broad but short drum, and an upper part which broadens out to a square top. The drum is divided into triangles by a double band with little loops, and the triangles are filled with heavily stylized grapes. The upper part shows a shell-like fluting. The top is decorated with a simple rectangular pattern within which there is a not very clear decoration. This simple, completely un-antique ornamental carving of an irregular basic form, which is equally foreign to the antique, is not drawn from far-off oriental sources but appears to be a product of the individual decorative imagination of a crude type of folk art. These two capitals are also very near in time to the first two mentioned. All four together give us an impression of the rich variety in this sphere of architectural ornamentation, though they by no means exhaust the manifest possibilities which it offers. It is precisely in this sphere that the variations are almost infinite. We cannot do more than present extreme examples in order to show its approximate limits. Let us then, turn to yet other contrasts where the form at first will be ignored, while the meaning and purpose is discussed.

What we are accustomed to call Coptic art comes from the late antique period, at a time when paganism was coming to an end, and Christendom was preparing to assume sole mastery of the Roman Empire. While in Rome and the other great centres, the old Greek and Roman myths and cults retreated further and further, and were replaced by mystery religions, philosophical interpretations or eastern religions, it appears that this was not so in Egypt. From the Greek towns and settlements in the Nile Valley we know of a number of works which show that the Greek mythology was still very much alive — and frequently depicted with a frankness which does not permit all examples of this type to be exhibited. At the same time there also began to flourish in the Coptic world — but later in the region of the Greek settlements in Egypt — an art that is new in purpose, motivated by Christian belief. Such a parallel growth is natural in the late antique and is not in any way confined to Egypt, but nowhere else are the contrasts so crass, and the way in which the new belief took possession so clear. Here, incidentally, we encounter in an even more acute form the essential difference between provincial Greek and Coptic art, a problem which we have already come up against, and with which we must continually concern ourselves, as it is one of the key questions of late antique art in Egypt. And here again we shall deliberately take extreme examples for comparison, and classify works similar in form but basically different in meaning. In this way we can get some idea of the very wide range of subject — the so-called iconography of late antique art in Egypt — though we make no attempt to arrive at an exact assessment. It is astonishingly great,



24 Limestone  
frieze with  
acanthus branch  
detail



25 Limestone  
slab from  
an  
ornamental  
frieze



26 Limestone  
frieze with  
tendrils  
of leaves  
from Bawit







27 Limestone  
pilaster with  
Greek key  
pattern  
and rosettes  
of flowers  
from Bawit (?)



28 Limestone  
pilaster with  
two-handled va  
and acanthus  
branches



29 Limestone two-zoned capital with  
vine-branch,  
lions and cross from Bawit (?)

30 Limestone two-zoned capital with  
basketwork carving,  
birds, cross and little trees from  
Sheikh Abada









although examples of official art are lacking, with the result that there are no historical representations or official state themes.

Let us begin with a few examples from the sphere of religion, which were particularly prominent in late antique Egypt, namely those of female deities. To take the Christian subjects first, we have just seen how in Christian iconography a theme of heartfelt humanity was created, that of the Virgin Mary nursing her Divine Child. We can add to these two carved examples others from wall paintings, thus demonstrating the same dual possibility of representation. Both come from the monastery of Jeremiah at Saqqara. Plates 5, 6  
Plate 33  
 One of them, an unfortunately very much damaged fresco, shows the affectionate, human, maternal type in the manner of the stele from Medinet el-Faiyum; the other, better Plate II  
 preserved, shows by contrast the sacerdotal, devout, direct characteristics of the second example from the Faiyum. They are of about the same period. In the monastery of Bawit Plate 100  
 the theme has also been taken up, and here again the representation is warmly human. At the same time there were also naturally examples of the Queen of Heaven type which were influenced by the Early Christian and Early Byzantine iconography. Thus we see on a relief in Cairo, of unknown origin, the enthroned Madonna. She sits on a throne Plate 34  
 with lathe-turned feet, a high back, a thick cushion and a footstool decorated with precious stones. Her carriage is strictly upright, completely frontal, and very regal. Precisely in front of the central axis of her body sits the Christ Child upon her lap, like a small adult. Two angels stand like heavenly bodyguards or masters of ceremonies on each side of the throne. The relief is broken off at the top, but twisted columns behind the angels allow one to see that the Madonna was placed under a canopy or arcade such as surrounded imperial personages. This Madonna is of the so-called *Nikopoia* (bringer of victory) type. This is a Byzantine motif, and the oldest known example occurs among the mosaics of Sant' Apollinare Nuovo in Ravenna, from the time of Theodoric the Great. Next to it one might place an ivory carving in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan. Here Plate 35  
 the Madonna is similarly regal and noble, only the angels are placed higher, and the very small figures of a praying wise man and the repentant Salome are introduced. Moreover the position of the Christ Child is somewhat different, in that He is represented three-quarter face, sitting on His mother's right fore-arm well to the side. This Madonna is very close to the Early Byzantine types of the *Hodigitria*. There are similar examples too among the wall-paintings of Bawit, and finally, very shortly before the Arab invasion, there appears still another type of Madonna of great humanity. It survives in an ivory carving in the Baltimore Museum. Here the enthroned Mother of God — her head is Plate 36  
 turned a little towards the left — no longer faces so squarely towards the front. Her Son sits on her right hand which is raised to her breast, and has His little arm round His Mother's neck. He presses His face against Mary's left cheek. Thus the old Christian art of Egypt knew the maternal as well as the majestic Madonna. Mary has taken the place of the Queen of Heaven and the Divine Mother Isis in the belief and piety of the people, and, as has long been known, has taken over from the representations of Isis her image of the

31 Limestone two-zoned capital with grapes and fluting from Der Mawas

32 Limestone capital with vine leaves from Saqqara

nursing mother. By this means the mystery of the incarnation of the Son of God is conveyed to the faithful in a manner as simple as it is impressive. All these representations of the Mother of God, no matter to which type they belong, radiate a like dignity and serenity.

How do the representations of heathen mythology appear by comparison? Let us consider a contrast of the crassest kind: the representation of Leda and the Swan is often found, particularly at Ahnas. This adventure of the disguised king of the gods, Zeus, is depicted so unmistakably and clearly, that one would hardly be doing the sculptures an injustice were one to describe them as verging on pornography. There is no question of human or divine dignity here, and the frankness of presentation is exhibitionist. It is true, the classical Hellenic world was not exactly restrained in its representation of erotic and sexual prototypes, but we look in vain for such an unequivocal picture of the Swan and the Spartan queen in classical and Hellenistic art. One is inclined to ask oneself whether the myth can be taken here as religious at all, or whether it is not simply an excuse for suggestive presentation.

The way in which sculptured female divinities disport themselves is scarcely more decent. For example, we see in a niche from Ahnas Venus sitting in a shell, wearing a large charm (*bullā*) on a thick necklet and enticingly waving a light cloak behind her to set off her slim body. On another niche from the same place she stands before her shell, again wearing a *bullā*, and draws the pleated mantle between her thighs in an almost obscene manner. Representations of the nymph Daphne, who changed herself into a laurel tree in order to escape from Apollo's attentions, were very popular. She also is completely naked and the pudenda are shown with marked clarity. A fragment from Antinoe, now in the Louvre, will serve as an example. How little is by now left of the original meaning of the myth is shown by a small ivory tablet in the Museo Nazionale in Ravenna which shows besides Daphne also her persecutor, Apollo. He is serenading the nymph on his lyre, she waves him goodbye in a friendly way; a pretty idyll, no longer a shocking picture of the god's passion.

None of these representations has anything whatsoever of religious dedication or even dignity. Largely emptied of their original meaning, they appear as a dance of phantoms. One is reminded of the temptations of the Coptic anchorites, who struggled with the devil when he plagued them with enticing visions in the form of naked women. Compared with the high solemnity, the beautiful human dignity and the sometimes almost frightening majesty of the Madonna pictures, all these ladies are indeed frivolous, very demi-mondaine, and little or not at all suitable for cult or devotional pictures.

However, not all late antique heathen representations of goddesses in Egypt are of this kind. As an example of more decorous figures, we have chosen the ivory Isis Pharos from Henry II's pulpit in the cathedral at Aachen, a truly discreetly dressed, placidly standing, very earnest and dignified lady. She still has something of the devotional picture, a certain majesty can in no way be denied her, and yet she does not look right; too many









things are crowded round her, some of them from completely different cults. Here Pan blows his pipes, there a maenad dances. Isis is wearing the *modius*, the characteristic head-dress of Serapis, and holds the cornucopia of Flora, Tyche or Abundantia. One senses distinctly that the spiritual strength of the goddess is no longer adequate, and, as always happens, she has been added to in order to increase her importance. That is certainly not an Egyptian characteristic of the late antique. This heaping-up of the attributes of the most varied divinities upon a single one, who then becomes the highest or even the sole divinity, is often found in late antique syncretism. The impression of overprofuse decoration that this creates contrasts sharply, however, with the simplicity of the Madonna pictures.

We can already pause for a moment at this point in the realization that here two diametrically opposed worlds face each other. Between them is no bridge, no path, no link. From this declining paganism Christian art could find absolutely nothing it could make its own. Old and new stand in irreconcilable conflict.

True, in one small segment of motifs the circumstances might have been different. In the pagan art of the Nile Valley sea divinities of all kinds, no doubt originating from the legends of the port of Alexandria, were very popular; such as, for example, a nereid on a niche from Ahnas, now in Cairo, who lies elegantly and casually naked upon a lion with a fish body, waving a cloak like an arch over her modishly coiffed head. Sea divinities of another kind have been represented by a sculptor, probably a Copt, in a relief now in Recklinghausen: nude women with fish-tails, therefore certainly sirens in the form in which they were depicted in the late antique. By a simple trick he has changed the dangerous enchantresses into servants of the new religion: a cross on a little chain round their necks makes it seem as though the sirens were singing Christian songs. But similar examples are very rare. Only in representations of angels did it also occur. The naked winged boys, the *erotes* of antique art, have been found in Egypt too. Thus we find them on a fragment of a niche gable from Antinoe, now in the Louvre, where they jointly hold a flower by the stem that hangs down on the carved garland of the gable. The *erotes* are slender and to a certain extent well-proportioned and graceful.

Now let us consider a fragment of a niche of uncertain origin, but which in its style clearly points to Antinoe. On it a naked boy with large wings is perched in a somewhat indecorous position. In his left hand he holds an oval shield, in his right a censer on a bulbous flask. In the curve above his head stands a cross. The exhibitionist boy is evidently an angel! The sculptor from the old Greek town has depicted his heavenly messenger like the old *erotes*, as a naked boy. At least this agrees with representations from the Jewish world of angels as beings of unmistakably male sex.

The familiar image of the Christian angel derives from the antique *nike* or Victory. She is also met with in late antique Egypt; for example, on a pediment in Cairo. She wears a long-sleeved robe, a *bulla* round the neck and a girdle round the waist. Similar to her in form are, for instance, the angels worshipping the Cross on a relief from Bawit (?).

Plate 43

Plate 44

Plate 45

Plate 46

Plate 47

Plate 48

Plate 49 Moreover, we can see in the Coptic relief, now in Recklinghausen, that the one-armed angels preparing to raise Christ to heaven are clearly related in form to this image.

But outside this narrow iconographic sphere of angels in their various late antique Egyptian manifestations, we again find only the crassest contrasts. Let us take a few examples. On a niche from Ahnas, now in Cairo, a faun dallies with a maenad. On another

Plate 50 similar type of piece, very likely from the same place, a richly clad young woman tenderly caresses the beard of a very lightly dressed lyreplayer (if this scene is intended to represent David and the spirit of song, one can only be amazed by such a misinterpretation; nothing could be further from the idea of a poet and his muse!). These Greeks from Herakleopolis Magna were apparently a frivolous people. We have already discovered more or less erotic tendencies on many monuments from this town. That thereby the original solemnity of the myth was lost evidently disturbed the light-hearted people but little. How completely different is the spirit that speaks to us from a relief in the

Plate 51  
Plate 52 Brooklyn Museum! We do not know whence it comes, but it appears to be Coptic in the true meaning of the word. It shows the martyrdom of St Thecla. The saint, clad only in a skirt, raises above her head with outstretched arms a large cross, the symbol of her Christian death. From crudely depicted trees beside her spring two wolves or hounds ready to sink their teeth into her body. The horror of martyrdom, the heroic courage of the woman facing such a death, her proud certainty of winning eternal life by dying for her faith — all this is brought out by the simplest means in a wholly valid and impressive form. The relief itself is a witness to the faith for which Thecla died and for which countless Egyptians were once driven to martyrdom. In contrast to the very worldly frivolity of the sculpture from Ahnas here is fanaticism, the dedicated solemnity of Coptic Christendom convincingly expressed.

Let us pass on to the representation of the same theme, a lyre player, from both pagan and Christian sources, and thus show the basic difference in interpretation. On a relief now

Plate 53 in Cairo, that very probably comes from Ahnas (Herakleopolis Magna), Orpheus sits on a cushioned seat, his left leg partly covered by a cloak. With giant goggle-eyes in a foolish face he stares at the observer; a soulless image that caricatures rather than honours the

Plate 54 master of song. Contrast this with the David plucking at his lyre, now in Leningrad. Richly dressed, a cap upon his tresses, he sits on a folding chair; solemn and a little morose, he gazes out of the picture. The relief is certainly no artistic masterpiece, but breathes the same earnest solemnity that we find in so many of the Christian works in Egypt.

Only occasionally does the pagan sculpture from Ahnas also turn towards genuine and

Plate 56 convincing religious solemnity and dignity, as for example, on the relief of the Nile river god, now in the Brooklyn Museum, or the crowned god with the tiny children on his

Plate 55 shoulders, in Cairo. These bearded men with giant eyes have something arresting about them. One can still feel in them something of the *numen tremendum*, they do not have









37 Eros and Leda with the swan.  
Limestone relief from Ahnas



38 Sea divinity and Venus in her shell.  
Limestone niche relief from Ahnas



39 Venus in her shell. Detail  
from a limestone niche relief from A

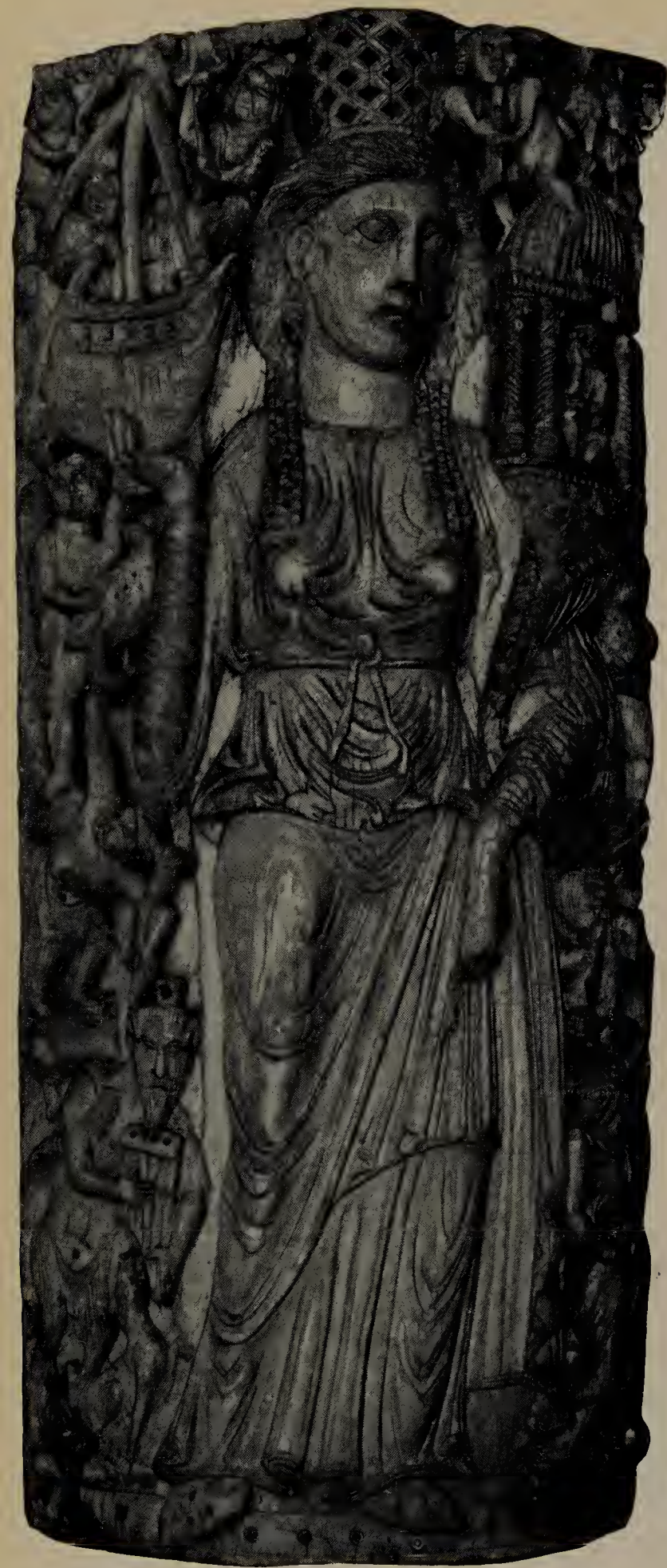
opposite :

40 Daphne. Limestone relief from Sheik









41 Isis Pharos with Pan, maenads and putti.  
Ivory relief from the pulpit of Henry II



42 Apollo and Daphne. Ivory relief



the spent and erotic look of the other sculpture from the same place. With the Dionysos of unknown origin, now in Dumbarton Oaks, the archaic grandeur of this divine image has been weakened to a very morose solemnity, as though the god were suffering from the effects of too much drink. Likewise on another relief from the same place, showing Dionysos on an ox-cart travelling to a temple, which certainly once surmounted a portal, nothing remains of the awe-inspiring power of the god's early period. Rather, it is a pretty curly-headed, but sullenly withdrawn boy who holds the reins. And finally from a door gable from Ahnas, today in Cairo, the wine god sways simperingly among his vine branches, a happily tipsy youth, clinging to the stems. It is really exceptional for this sculpture of a paganism which no longer takes itself seriously, to express any religious depth. In contrast to this, Christian art, when depicting male saints, knows only one attitude, that of prayer. Though it may sometimes appear to have stiffened into a pose, the men who created these works were convinced of the only fitting attitude for men before their God. Be it on a wooden beam from Bawit, now in Berlin, showing Daniel between the lions, or on a marble relief in Vienna, showing Menas between camels, or on a fragment of a pediment from Antinoe, now in Recklinghausen, showing an unknown man among acanthus leaves, or the fragment of a tombstone in Dumbarton Oaks, showing an old saint in a monk's habit framed in a narrow space, they all raise their hands in prayer to God. The saint is deeply earnest, the man from Antinoe appears to smile. They both, however, stand beside the saint of the old covenant, who was considered by old Christendom to be a symbol of God's power to resurrect from death into life, and the martyr of the new covenant, who, according to the belief of the Church, ascended straight to Paradise through his death for Christ. They are united by the similarity of their posture and symbolize in this way the early Christian attitude towards death. However uniform this all appears to be at first sight, here is a very important basic belief of the new faith, and a solemn religious concern is thereby expressed. Here again the difference between it and the late heathen sculpture of Egypt can be clearly seen.

*Plate 57*

*Plate 59*

*Plate 58*

*Plate 60*

*Plate 13*

*Plate 61*

*Plate 62*

So we find, in spite of incidental points of contact and transferences, two absolutely irreconcilable streams in the art of the late antique in Egypt, which enable us to perceive its wide range. The great spiritual revolution of the antique world, which was nearing its end through the oncoming dominion of the Christian Church, showed up the discrepancies between the old and the new more sharply in Egypt than in other places in the Roman Empire. The heathen works of art are for the most part frivolous, and often unpleasing; the majority of Christian works are even more serious and uncompromising, and more individual in style than so-called Roman imperial art.



## ORIGINS

Anyone who looks at works of so-called Coptic art for the first time will speedily give up hope of finding a common factor in their intrinsic contradictions, the irreconcilable differences in their forms of expression, and the great contrasts of their subject matter. Much will remind the observer remotely of the classical antique, much will appeal to him through a primitive archaism, which is strangely familiar to modern man; much else on the other hand is reminiscent of the attempts at artistic expression of undeveloped races or children. He will encounter well-known Greek myths, but their aspect, their artistic form and their human image will seem so un-Greek and their methods of portrayal all too often exhibitionistic in a manner that is alien to the eye accustomed to the mature art of Hellas or the later beauty of Hellenism. No less familiar themes of Christian art present themselves to the observer, but often they give the impression of being portrayals of mysterious and horrifying, or primitive, barbaric idols. Everything appears different from the antique, and yet without reference to the antique, hardly anything appears to be imaginable or explicable. One looks in vain for a link with the splendid art of ancient Egypt, by this time atrophied and slowly disappearing, but living on until the zenith of the Roman Empire, still modelling itself on Pharaonic art, preserving the ancient in form and subject. Before long he must ask himself: Is this 'Coptic' art really at home in the Nile Valley? Has it anything to do with the Copts, the descendants of the Egyptian people? Is it in some way an offshoot of the late antique? Or does it show how a people deeply opposed to the classical antique attempted to assimilate this cultural heritage, transforming, adapting and barbarizing it in the process? How can the manifold nature of style and expression in this art be explained? How did it develop? Do these very varied works which come under the one heading manifest a development in style that can be traced? Or did different places come to different solutions at about the same date? Question upon question, to which research has not yet given, and still cannot give a satisfactory answer — so far we have done little more than laboriously cut the first clearings in the overgrown jungle of this art. Although the literature on Coptic art or special studies devoted to it are very extensive, up till now no clear, conclusive picture has emerged, needing only a few illuminating rays from the floodlight of research.

What is meant by, or what do scholars understand by, the term 'Coptic art'? The word 'Coptic' derives from the Arabic corruption of the Greek word *Aigyptios* that in Roman times would certainly have been pronounced *Egyptios*, the Arabs assimilated this term, which referred to the inhabitants of the villages of the Nile Valley who were descended from the ancient Egyptian peasantry, into their Semitic speech in the form *kipt*. Out of this developed *Copt*. Copts, therefore, are an Egyptian Hamitic people with Hamitic speech, in contrast with the Greeks or Romans, and also the Arabs. Taken literally, therefore, Coptic art would be the art of these Coptic people.



This was the term formerly used in research. There is no need to go into the history of scholarship here, but it is not unimportant to know that experts like Maspero, Gayet, Ebers, and others, would only recognize as Coptic art those predominantly Christian monuments of the Nile Valley that originated in the fifth century. The extension of the term to describe all examples of late antique Egyptian art was brought into use at the beginning of this century by Strzygowski, and other scholars have followed his example. True, slight doubts have arisen from time to time as to whether this was valid; indeed whether there was such a thing as Coptic art. But on the whole, the use of the term was established — which is perhaps unfortunate, since it is not correct. It overlooks or disregards the fact that the population of the Nile Valley was no unified whole, no unified people; it ignores the cultural, legal and social barriers between the Egyptians on the one hand and the Romans and Greeks on the other. If one regards the Egyptian population as a homogeneous entity, one is utterly unable to explain their very different attitude towards artistic expression; varying ability, craftsmanship at different levels and also changes in artistic taste, of that mode of representation that is called style, being hardly sufficient to explain the gulfs that lie between individual groups of works. A somewhat closer examination of all that is included under the name of Coptic art shows clearly that we are dealing with several more or less unified groups, whose origin can be to a certain extent established. Between these groups there may be links, as well as intermediate stages with their offshoots or hybrids, but they themselves can be sufficiently recognized and classified.

That being so, we find ourselves of necessity becoming further and further removed from the once heatedly discussed question as to whether Coptic art was a new national Egyptian art, as Ebers said; an offshoot of Byzantine art, as Maspero and Gayet took it to be; or the work of Egyptian artists of Imperial Roman times, who worked with Egyptian technique but in Greek style, as Strzygowski taught. On the other hand, Sybel put forward ideas which merited attention, but which unfortunately were not sufficiently carefully considered: he had seen that the Greeks must have had a hand in 'Coptic' works, and that 'the same artistic degeneration as befell the Egyptians' also befell the Greeks in the country. The advantage of this theory is that it brings one closer to the true nature of the phenomenon which Strzygowski called Coptic art, and that it may enable us, ultimately, to work out a chronology of Coptic art.

The great difficulty in arriving at the relative ages of the late antique monuments of the Nile Valley is that we possess almost no works that can be dated with certainty. The number of those that can be dated by their antiquarian rather than their artistic characteristics is not much greater. It is true that we find statements about the dating of the listed exhibits in all the catalogues of the relevant collections, exhibitions and museums. But mostly they are arrived at in the same way as did Strzygowski when he stated, with great honesty: 'The dates which I give are often only a matter of intuition, and should merely be used as a stimulus towards further investigation.' In scholarship, hunches

alone constitute treacherous ground, and one very soon finds how, in this particular case, they may amount to little more than: what appears to be nearer to the antique in form and content is earlier, what is further from it is later. The dating, therefore, springs from a judgement which is primarily aesthetic. This differs according to the temperament of the different people working on the subject. Besides that, it sets itself an absolute standard, the antique, and from this there follows a vague decadence theory which assumes a gradual weakening of the radiance of the antique, a slow but steady divergence from its artistic spirit, the results of this decadence being a primitivization and barbarization. This theory of decadence once also determined the picture of late antique artistic development in the whole Roman Empire. We know today that it is untenable. Artistic development did not run in a steady descent from the heights of antique artistic ability to the depths of barbaric crudity. Rather, it rose and fell constantly — if the antique is to be used as a yardstick — in a changing relationship with the antique. Pronounced and striking renaissances alternated with times in which provincial or quite foreign, mostly oriental, influences established themselves. One should regard any theory of decadence with mistrust and reserve. Why should Egypt alone have taken such a different course from other parts of the Roman Empire, to which it also belonged and whose culture it had also assimilated? Another difficulty that constantly stood in the way of understanding the nature and development of Coptic art was the fact that so many works bore either no, or only unreliable information, regarding their origin. We have seen already how sadly often we must say 'provenance unknown'. True, of the material we are sure of, much can be classified once we have understood the artistic style of the individual centre. But there are many pieces which it is hopeless to try to place, and these still present considerable problems.

But ignoring all these difficulties, one thing is very clear; what we call 'Coptic art' within the limits laid down by Strzygowski, is no unified whole, but a reservoir of often very diverse streams. These streams do not merge into one new type but run parallel to each other for several centuries; indeed, it would appear that a mingling begins only after the Arab conquest. The streams, as we have already indicated, can be localized in definite places, at least to a certain extent. With these considerations in mind, H. Zalusker has claimed for 'Coptic art' that it is a definite folk art. We shall see to what a far-reaching extent this has been proved to be correct. But the question is, who were these 'folk' whose art we are studying here? So as to come to grips with this problem we must of necessity give a little consideration to the historical aspect.









45 Eros. Fragment of the gable of a limestone niche

46 Winged boy (angel?). Fragment of a limestone niche



47 Victory.  
Limestone pediment relief



48 Angels worshipping the Cross.  
Part of a limestone frieze



49 The Ascension.  
Limestone relief









## EGYPT UNDER THE ROMAN EMPIRE

We are concerned here only with the history of Egypt in the Roman Empire, because it is in the course of this that what we call Coptic art originated. The stirring history of Ptolemaic rule, so much richer in exciting and world-shaking events as it is, can only be touched upon in so far as it laid the foundation of Roman administration in Egypt.

The fateful hour of Egypt's incorporation in the Roman Empire came in the year 30 B.C. The experiment, magnificent in its own way, of the last Ptolemy, Cleopatra, had finally come to grief. This lady, as politically gifted as she was in the arts of love, first married two of her brothers (the Ptolemies had taken over from the ancient Egyptians the custom of brother and sister marriage in order to maintain the purity of the royal blood). She then appeared in world history as the paramour of Caesar, to whom she bore a son, and subsequently as the wife and co-ruler of the hot-blooded Mark Antony, by whom she had several children. She failed, however, to conquer the heart of the victorious Octavian, the later Augustus. The attempt by Mark Antony to make the eastern part of the Roman Empire into a kind of great kingdom had inevitably led to civil war, in which the old warrior, without any particular gift for strategy and enervated by luxurious living, went down before the icy political craft of Octavian and the military genius of Agrippa. Cleopatra found herself, in contrast with many other oriental rulers, no longer opportunely on the side of the victor; Mark Antony had now become a deadly danger. The disgrace of being taken to Rome in triumph by Octavian drove her to suicide. With that, the dream of forging the Nile Valley into a mighty kingdom, dominant in the east, was finally shattered.

The conqueror himself appropriated the defeated and rulerless land. This certainly went against Roman tradition — even Caesar, whose adopted son he was, had established his conquests in Gaul as provinces of the Roman Empire, entirely under the rule of the Roman authorities, as, in general, Augustus and his successors did with their other acquisitions. But in doing this Octavian followed the custom of the country. Always in the past, the country had been the property of the sovereign, of the pharaohs as of foreign masters, therefore of the Persian kings as of the Ptolemies. So now Egypt became the personal possession of the emperor. This was doubtless a clever move since it made possible a fairly smooth transfer of the country to the new régime. As far as the people were concerned only the ruler changed, but not the system of government. The highest posts in the administration of the country were in the hands of imperial officials of knightly rank, who took their orders directly from the emperor. The Senate was not allowed to interfere, as was made plain without any possibility of misunderstanding by the prohibition of the entry of senators into the country. Since the country was rich, all this was highly advantageous to the imperial treasury. The ancient, carefully maintained irrigation system had made of the narrow Nile Valley an abundant granary set between arid wastes. Many industries had also been developed here. There was money for the

50 Faun and maenad. Limestone niche relief from Ahnas

51 Poet and Muse (?). Fragment of a limestone niche from Ahnas



asking; from ancient times the arable land had belonged to the king; now it was the property of the emperor of Rome. It was cultivated by the peasants, who were pressed into service and had to pay heavy taxes. These profits now flowed into the imperial treasury, a very welcome and fairly reliable source of income, with which no one else could tamper. Because Augustus still took care not to overstep the boundary between public and private funds — a scrupulousness which was forgotten all too soon after his day — such a considerable increase of wealth must have been very pleasant for him. Money is power so long as it lasts! And power was extremely agreeable to Augustus, however republican he might pretend to be. At the same time there was much land to be had that had once belonged directly to the Ptolemies. Out of this his close relations could help themselves to considerable properties, as we know that Livia, his wife, and other members of his family, did. Such estates formed a reassuring reserve, the best of it being that the Senate had no right to say anything about it, since there was no question of its being imperial land, and it was a really practical solution to the problem. What Augustus personally took over was a foreign body in the Roman Empire, with its extraordinarily complicated constitutional structure. It adjoined provinces as well as states that were theoretically only allied to Rome; in practice, however, they were part of the empire, and legally Egypt had hardly anything in common with them. In the long run this special position effectively prevented the assimilation of the Nile Valley into the rest of the empire, and laid the foundation for its later difficulties, which could not be eliminated by any imperial reform.

During the time of the later Ptolemies, much of what the first members of this ruling house had, with a certain brutal wisdom, put into effect, was disrupted or forgotten. Now Augustus regulated the political and social conditions with cool severity in just the same way as the Ptolemies had once liked to do. These descendants of Alexander the Great's general, who had carved out his Egyptian realm from the legacy of the Macedonian, were faced with the same problem as so many conquerors of old civilizations: maintenance of rule by a very small minority of a foreign race and culture over the great mass of a conquered people. We know enough examples of how quickly a people of ancient culture can assimilate the foreign ruling class. But that mostly happens when the culture of the conquered is at a much higher level than that of the conqueror. In this case, however, power was in the hands of highly civilized people. In order to prevent the destruction of this ruling class in Egypt the mingling of the two peoples was strictly forbidden. The new masters settled in closed groups, and they alone were allowed to bear arms. Mixed marriages were forbidden. So it was decreed, but it did not remain like that. It became necessary to take Egyptians into the army; the order against mixed marriages was forgotten; a large class of mixed race grew up, and many Egyptians exerted great political and financial influence. All this was brought to an end in a manner as ruthless as it was thorough. Augustus found a people divided into Hamitic Egyptians, numerous people of mixed race and the so-called Greeks, up till now the ruling class of the Ptolemaic kingdom.



Greeks had long been settled in the Nile Valley. The ancient Naukratis in the west of the Nile Delta was their town. The XXVI Dynasty had the support of Greek mercenaries, Greek merchants carried on a thriving trade in the Nile Valley. Carian and Ionian mercenaries were garrisoned from Pelusium to Bubastis. Naukratis, however, was a completely Greek town, with Greek law, Greek culture, Greek constitution and since the time of Amasis (late sixth century BC), the only permitted place of residence of the Greeks, who were in consequence drawn from all the Greek states. The Persian conquest brought not only Persians to the country, of whom many remained after Alexander's conquests, but also Ionian Greeks and other races from Asia Minor. With Alexander came the Macedonians, and also a new wave of Greeks and Thracians. All these together formed the new ruling class in the Ptolemaic kingdom, a thoroughly mixed community; besides the races already mentioned, it included considerable numbers of Celtic Galatians and half-barbarian Phrygians, Mysi and Lydians, and many others.

All these were united as 'Greeks'. What they had in common was certainly not Greek culture, and also not the so-called Hellenism. A large number of these 'Greeks' were really of barbaric stock; any Hellenic traits they may have possessed had little to do with culture. Soldiers seldom bring cultural influences with them. What bound these 'Greeks' together, in contrast to the Egyptians, was the Greek law they had in common. In addition, they had the general duties of administration and defence, and the speech which was common to all, the so-called *koine*, the colloquial Greek of the people that had become very different from classical Attic. This colourful medley grew in time into a people who no longer had much in common with the old Greek Hellenism.

These Greeks lived in the few towns of the country; that is to say, apart from the ancient Naukratis, mostly in Alexandria and Ptolemais, otherwise in the so-called *politeumata*, settlements under Greek law, without the status of a town, which were scattered over the whole Nile Valley and the great oases. The *politeumata* were usually the most important places in the district (the old division into *nomes*, or districts, had been maintained almost unaltered) and were principally settled with soldiers.

Augustus now set up insurmountable barriers between the two peoples of the Nile Valley. The Egyptians were legally no more than serfs (*deditici*), the property of the emperor. Any possibility of rising higher in the social scale was prohibited by law. It was completely out of the question for an Egyptian to gain Roman citizenship; even the rights of the Greeks were denied him. Egyptians could not be taken into the armed forces because this automatically brought Roman citizenship with it. If an Egyptian should serve in the Roman fleet as an oarsman he would for the time of his service be under Roman law; when his service ended he was automatically deprived of this and he became once more a *dediticus*. This was an exceptional stipulation which conformed with nothing else in the Roman legal practice of the time.

The Greeks were much better off. They retained the higher legal status they had had in Ptolemaic times, and were not classed as *deditici*, but as confederates (*foederati*).



They could acquire citizenship of a Greek state and thus Alexandrian rights, and finally in this way become *cives Romani*. This mostly entailed a considerable outlay of money. Cheaper, but more uncomfortable, was the way to Roman citizenship through service in the legions, which took up a lot of time and was not without danger. Many were very reluctant to take this course, as it appears that the descendants of the Ptolemaic conquerors had become very fond of the pleasures of this world in the course of the centuries, and were now comfortable bourgeois and peasants. The symbol of this privileged class was the *gymnasium* (school) in their settlements, which here also was still, and for a long time to come, the centre for education and sport, if far from attaining the high level it had once been in Hellas. Further opportunities for education existed in the far-famed university of Alexandria, and the other magnificent cultural facilities of this metropolis. As so often happens, with higher privileges went better opportunities of education; and for the Egyptians entry to the *gymnasium* was something which was without exception barred.

With regard to these two parts of the population, the emperor had merely to revive the original regulations of the Ptolemies, and fit them into the framework of the Roman Empire. But what about the substantial element that belonged to neither race? How to classify the progeny of mixed marriages? Up to now they had been tacitly reckoned among the Greeks; more important, they themselves considered that they belonged to them. The first Ptolemies had mercilessly degraded these half-castes to the Egyptian level and forbidden mixed marriages, making them punishable by law. Later on, these laws were very laxly enforced. Augustus renewed them in all their original severity. He brought the pretensions of the half-castes harshly to an end; they were decreed to be on the level of the Egyptians, and like them completely debarred from every possibility of improving their social position.

Over these two completely divided parts of the population was now placed a handful of Roman soldiers and officials, who had carried out their term of service in the Nile Valley. They were certainly the most highly privileged class in the Roman Empire, but did not appreciably differ from the Greeks in culture. Naturally they brought certain traditions with them that they carried on — we know about them principally from their tombstones — but they differed from the Greeks not nearly as much as these did from the Egyptians. To all appearances there were no purely Roman settlements.

The two parts of the population were as sharply differentiated in their social position as in their legal standing; we can disregard the Romans, because their duties were clearly defined. The Egyptians were peasants, labourers, craftsmen, boatmen, miners, drovers, hunters and fishermen. They were shut out from all the higher occupations and professions, and above all from the higher official posts. They could be village scribes or even village mayors, but no more than that. And these modest little posts were only open to the Egyptians because they called for a precise knowledge of agriculture and, above all, of irrigation, that is to say, the distribution of the flood water of the Nile, which was vital



for the fertility of the land. All the high administrative posts were exclusively in the hands of the Romans and the land-owning Greeks. The Egyptians continued to live under their old district organization. They cultivated the land under their foreign masters as they had done for centuries, and, though these fortunately changed, were as enslaved as ever.

Even so, a marked improvement in their position appeared to take place initially through the reforms of Augustus. Thereby their gigantic estates were taken from the temples and put under state administration. This was not a measure directed against the country's religion, rather it meant that the upkeep of the temples and maintenance of the priests were paid out of the proceeds of the former temple lands. It meant that an overwhelming burden was lifted from the peasantry, who had had to do forced labour for two masters: the State and the Church. Hand in hand with that went a radical — but unfortunately not lasting — elimination of corruption in the administrations. The taxes were regulated according to the old Ptolemaic laws, whereby trustworthy officials and tax collectors were made responsible for the orderly carrying out of their duties. There was a breathing space, but not for long.

The Greeks, on the other hand, were landowners. Originally they had been settled as an armed peasantry, that is as soldiers who instead of pay received the income from a peasant holding which they ran themselves. These military fiefs became in time hereditary estates. This already fundamentally distinguished them from the Egyptians, who were serfs or tenants on state land. In some places these Greek landowners had as neighbours Roman veterans who had served their time and been rewarded with land, and these soon mixed with the Greeks socially. Besides this, any Greek who had the money, could buy untilled land from the authorities on condition that he would cultivate it. Thus there often arose beside the small and middle-sized Greek estates, a huge property. Rich Greek merchants and also important Romans acquired thoroughgoing feudal estates and through them at the same time genuine power, which enabled them to evade the tax authorities. But the special preserve of the Greeks was business and industry. Every lucrative source of income was open to them, because they would undertake any sort of occupation. So we know of huge factories, nearly all in Greek, though occasionally in Roman hands. Vast wealth was thus acquired by the merchants, who often, following the custom of the time and the desire for security, put it into land. The Egyptians for their part could scarcely accumulate large fortunes (the figure of the very rich Egyptian, Arbaces, in Bulwer Lytton's famous book *The Last Days of Pompeii* belongs to the realm of fantasy); they were divided according to their occupation into classes from which they could not escape and into which their children were born. They were neither landowners nor had they their own factories, or other means of production or transport; they were only tenants of the state or workers in state-supervised guilds; and the state saw to it that there was not much money to put by. The state needed all the money it could get; and this money had to come from the *deditici*, because the great lords were much too powerful for any tax collector to dare to meddle with them. Under the successors of Augustus, the tenant



tax-collectors became unpaid representatives of the State. This relieved the treasury and should also have relieved the taxpayer. But naturally the tax-collector took care that his honorary post was also a paying one. So the position of the taxpayer was not improved.

Seen as a whole, the first centuries of Roman rule on the Nile probably brought an improvement in conditions, but only for those classes that were already well-to-do or rich. 'The state of the tenants became worse and worse. The conditions in which the mass of the Egyptian population lived were far below average. Taxation was heavy, the method of collecting brutal and unjust, the forced labour was a heavy burden upon the peasant, and the integrity of the state officials was no more than a devout wish. So it is not surprising that unrest was widespread, and that the well-being of the country thereby suffered. As early as the beginning of the second century, and even in the first, we hear repeatedly that villagers refused to pay the taxes, or to do forced labour, and that they resorted to the long-established Egyptian method of striking, that is to say they left their villages and sought refuge in the swamps of the Delta; and it is not surprising that the deserters were ready to raise the flag of rebellion at the first opportunity, and that they found much sympathy with this among their companions in misfortune who had remained in the villages.' (Rostovtzeff)

The sorely strained patience of the Egyptian peasants and craftsmen was tried still further by the development of the Greek settlements. Although legally for the most part only villages, these places often developed into leading towns of the district (*metropolises*), and even though they did not have town rights they were similar to towns with every refinement developed by the Romans. Here the great Greek and Roman landowners settled down with a great display of luxury. As a result, business and industry flourished, though the control of these centres was in the Greek hands. Thus, in appearance and importance they grew into towns boasting all the achievements of the late antique civilization, and also achieved a moderate amount of self-rule. Naturally, the Egyptians still remained shut out from them, so that the social gulf became still deeper — and social envy grew.

The unjust differences between the exploiting overlords and the exploited common people soon became so unbearably marked, that it brought about rebellions. It appears that in the years AD 115 - 118 the Egyptians, together with the Jews, fought against the troops of the Emperor Trajan, while the property-owning classes sided with the government. Rebellions also broke out under Hadrian and Antoninus Pius. None of this was yet very serious, and the Roman troops soon put down the uprisings. More dangerous was the revolt of the 'Shepherds' under Marcus Aurelius, which was more difficult to quell. The stability of the empire was not seriously shaken by it, and the Roman mastery of the Nile Valley was not affected, but it showed the mood the Egyptians were in. Rome had not understood how to gain the sympathy and loyalty of the *deditici*, nor, apparently, had she wished to do so. That accorded with lofty Roman self-confidence, but was not politically wise. It sowed the seeds of far too much trouble. At first only a few sharp





52 Martyrdom of St Thecla.  
Limestone relief



53 Orpheus. Limestone relief  
from Ahnas (?)



Far right:  
54 David. Relief





55 Crowned god (Nile?).  
Carved head on a limestone pillar

56 Nile and Gaia. Limestone relief











58 Dionysos.  
Limestone door gable

59 Dionysos on an ox-cart.  
Limestone niche





squalls presaged the storm, but it was to come later with destructive force, at a time when the Roman Empire, falling into decay, had no more power to resist. But much water was to flow down the Nile before then. To begin with these rebellions achieved nothing. The condition of the Egyptians by no means improved. Nor did the period following the murder of Commodus offer better prospects. In the third century the country lapsed into chaos like the other provinces of the empire. Wars with foreign powers, frightful epidemics, the breakdown of law, administration and culture were the causes of this chaos, the greatest crisis that had ever shaken the empire. It is true that Egypt hardly took an active part in the uprisings of the provinces against the emperor, or in foreign wars, but it suffered likewise in difficult times because of involvement with the empire.

In the year 202, the Emperor Septimius Severus introduced the municipal constitution into Egypt; but it only improved the lot of the Greek settlements, perhaps only that of the metropolises. Ten years later, the emperor's son and successor, Caracalla, gave all inhabitants of the empire Roman citizenship. It is disputed whether this measure also applied to the Egyptian *deditici*, or only to the Greeks in the country. There is little evidence to support the view that this 'Constitutio Antoniniana' gave the original population of the country a new legal standing; they very likely remained as they were. In any event it is unlikely that it would have improved matters, since this measure was not intended to do away with legal inequality in the empire for idealistic reasons, but to open up new possibilities for recruiting and to unify the method of collecting taxes.

During the political confusion of the third century, the Nile Valley belonged temporarily to the sphere of influence of Odenatus of Palmyra, who was officially defending the eastern empire against the Persians in the name of the emperor. Odenatus was the ruler of the Syrian trade centre in the desert, and was succeeded by the short-lived rule of his son Vabalathus, and his widow, Zenobia. But Egypt remained only a target for politics, never their centre of influence. We know of only one emperor establishing himself on the Nile against the central authority; he was called Julianus, and in 283 attempted to seize power. He was probably a pawn of the Greeks in Egypt; the Egyptians themselves took no part in his short-lived uprising.

Law and order returned to the empire only when Diocles, the son of an Illyrian slave, rose from the ranks of the legions to become emperor in the year 284. Thereafter he called himself Diocletian. Two years later he made his former comrade-in-arms, Maximianus, co-emperor, and in 293 he extended this joint rule by nominating Constantius and Galerius as Caesars (both the elder rulers had the title of Augustus). In this way the Tetrarchy (four-part rule) was established. This experienced warrior and able administrator re-organized the whole empire. Now at last Egypt received the same legal standing as other provinces, but at the same time was divided into three parts. This equality of rights did not bring the native Egyptians any advantages worth mentioning; certainly their legal status was not improved. It was rather a matter of the whole empire sinking to the low level of the Egyptians. The organization of the state was abruptly

Plate 64



centralized. An army of imperial officials carried out the orders from the centre. Imperial autocracy reached a pitch never before dreamed of, not even in the times of the atrocious Caligula, Nero, Domitian or Commodus, with their delusions of grandeur. Freedom of administration, occupation or movement was destroyed. Only those who were rich and therefore powerful enough, such as a landowner residing on his estates, could hope to remain relatively unmolested. Prices and tariffs were regulated by the state, and the currency was reformed. The regulation binding people to the soil or to their occupation was widely enforced. A pedantic bureaucracy and a nearly complete statutory regulation of all activities stifled private enterprise, personal freedom and social opportunities. Constantine the Great (AD 306 - 337) completed, with only few modifications, what had been begun by Diocletian. In the unified empire unified law now reigned. For the bulk of the people this naturally meant uniform duties and the same lack of rights in the face of the all-powerful state. Egypt was no longer an exception to the rest of the empire, but it had gained nothing thereby. Hatred and envy towards the foreign oppressors were not reduced in this way, they were not even kept within bounds.

If we pause here for a moment to sum up, we must conclude that Roman policy in Egypt since the conquest of the country had had the effect of cutting off the Egyptian element, that is to say the Copts, from the many races which composed the empire. The son of a Goth and of an Alan, who had risen in army service (Maximinus Thrax) was no less able to seize the imperial throne than the offspring of a desert sheikh (or of a Syrian innkeeper: Philip the Arab); but an Egyptian could never succeed in doing so. Families of Celtic, Iberian, Greek, African or Syrian origin might enter the Roman Senate, but not once did an Egyptian acquire even Greek legal town rights in the Nile Valley. A Carthaginian could study ancient philosophy (for example, St Augustine), a Copt would not even be accepted by the gymnasium of his home town. The Copts remained pariahs, despised and ignored. These people were never able to take part in the general cultural life, they were never Hellenized as even the wild mountain people of Asia Minor were. Their refinements were only superficial: many Copts learnt the *koine*, because it was the official language; Greek names were sometimes in fashion with the Copts and a little civilization was absorbed by imitation. All the same, the reign of Constantine the Great brought for the Egyptians, as well as for the empire in general, a basic change: Christianity, still so bloodily persecuted under the Tetrarchs, became a permitted religion, and under the leadership of this emperor, took the first steps towards becoming a state religion. Since the year 293 Egypt had been under the rule of Galerius, the ostensible initiator of the persecutions. In 305 Diocletian and Maximianus abdicated and Constantius and Galerius took the title of Augustus. In the east Maximinus Daia became Caesar, and he was, like his Augustus, Galerius, a bitter enemy of the new faith, and did not stop the persecutions when, in 311, the dying Galerius liberated Christianity. In the lands he ruled, especially in Egypt itself, the massacre continued, until in the summer of 313 his sovereignty ended.



Under Roman rule the Egyptians had continued to worship their ancient gods unmolested. While the people themselves were virtually excluded from the empire, their gods and goddesses, above all Isis, penetrated to its every corner, to Rome, to Britain and to the Rhineland. The early Christians regarded the Nile Valley, in spite of the numerous Jews who had long been settled in the country, as merely a heathen land, the home of idols and demons, and we read many harsh words written by the earliest defenders of Christianity against the Egyptian gods, especially, as was natural, the gods with animal bodies or heads. But already in the early fourth century, the church historian, Eusebius of Caesarea, called Egypt the Christian province of the empire, and emphasized that in every town and in every village altars were erected to God, and that Christians were devotedly struggling against the idol-worshippers. The horrifying number of victims in the last persecution of Christianity bear witness to his praise. And already the great Alexandrian theologian, Origen (died 253/4) extolled his fellow-countrymen for being so receptive of the new belief (without, unfortunately, saying to which race the Christian converts belonged).

How did this change come about? How did Egypt become Christian? We do not know. Our evidence about the history of the Church in the two first centuries is extremely scanty. According to *Acts II*, 10, among the Jews who witnessed the miracle of Pentecost were some from Egypt. And according to *Acts XVIII*, 24 f. there were already Christians in Alexandria in the time of the Apostles, and one of these, Apollos, was an eloquent and learned preacher of the Gospel. This points to extremely early missionary activity, to begin with probably among the Jewish settlements on the Nile. There were very many Jews in Alexandria in particular, where the Jewish colony was the largest in the world at that time. According to later legends the Evangelist, Mark, reputed to be the pupil and interpreter of St Peter, was the first preacher of the Christian faith in Alexandria and Egypt. However, Dionysius of Alexandria (died 264/5) knew nothing of this. We must see in this a later attempt to connect the founding of the Alexandrian community with one of the great figures of the early Church. This has nothing to do with history. It does not alter matters that Eusebius of Caesarea, in his history of the Church (completed in 303), reported that St Peter sent St Mark to Egypt, where he founded churches in Alexandria and elsewhere in the Nile Valley. The Bishop himself prefaced this statement with a sceptical 'It is said', showing that he treated the claim with reserve. St Mark's successor was, according to Eusebius, a cobbler named Anianos. Here there is a hint that in this metropolis too, Christianity found its first adherents among the lowest classes of the population. Even if we accept the historical authenticity of Anianos, we unfortunately do not know whether he was a Jew, a Greek, a Copt, or of some other nationality. Alexandria was a multi-racial city. Only the Greek quarter had legal town rights; the Jewish quarter existed as a separate community, while the Coptic districts had the status of villages. We do not know unfortunately who became converted, apart from some of the Jews.



The second century provides a few shreds of evidence. These deal, however, almost entirely with heresy. This so-called Gnosticism, an esoteric doctrine with borrowings from Christianity, in particular had an extraordinary influence. We know something about it and its partly very devious, often orgiastic, cults. Of the Church we hear almost nothing. The only important piece of information is that in 190, the Church in Egypt and in Palestine exchanged correspondence about the date of Easter. From this we see not only the importance of the Church in Egypt, but also that the ancient wisdom relating to the calendar was still fostered. It was here, by the way, that the date of the Feast of Epiphany was established (it is significant that 6 January was originally a feast of Isis). Thereafter we hear of the existence of two Gospels that were used in Egypt, but were not accepted into the New Testament canon, being declared heretical by the Church, the Gospel to the Egyptians and the Gospel to the Hebrews. From the finds from Nag Hammadi we know, too, that a considerable number of other apocryphal writings existed, some of which were also known as Gospels.

Suddenly, around the year 190, the Church of Alexandria appears to us as a solid edifice, without any evidence of its previous history or development. Because of the diversity of the town's population and their varied legal status, there were several congregations. Each was led by a presbyter. These chose from among them a bishop. He was only *primus inter pares*, not, as for the most part in other towns of the empire, the head of the congregation, claiming implicit obedience. Demetrius, one of these bishops (c. 188 - 230) provided a counterweight to the independence of his Alexandrian presbyters. Up to now there had been hardly any bishops, who indeed by old Christian custom existed only in towns. Demetrius made use of the municipal constitution, created or made effective by Septimius Severus, in order to establish bishops everywhere. These, however, were clearly differentiated from their brother bishops in the Roman Empire: they were not chosen by their congregations, and did not possess the usual independence; they were appointed by the Bishop of Alexandria, were dependent upon him, and under his jurisdiction. This gave him a faithful and stable following, whom only he could appoint. Later on the Alexandrian bishop could easily call together a synod of a hundred or more bishops, who obeyed his every word and were useful instruments in his clerical policies. This arrangement survived Diocletian's reform of the Empire, which dissolved the country's unity. Even the Libyan Pentapolis, which had never belonged to Egypt politically, was drawn in under Alexandrian jurisdiction, in spite of the fact that Church organization normally followed that of the state. In this wide territory the Bishop of Alexandria had absolute mastery over the Church — although he did not achieve this in his own town, since the presbyters maintained their independence for a long time. The powerful position of the Alexandrian Bishop was also shown by his title of Patriarch, which he later acquired, as also in the designation of *Papa* (he is known as Pope to this day).

66 Egyptian Christendom was of very great significance in the history of the Church; it was here that Christian religious philosophy and monasticism originated. Characteristically,



these two movements, with their world-wide influence, had their origins in the two different peoples of the Nile Valley: religious philosophy sprang from the Greek mind, monasticism from Egyptian religious feeling. Alexandria, already since the beginning of the third century the site of a school for Christian catechists, was the place in which Clement of Alexandria (died before AD 215) first introduced antique culture and Platonic philosophy into theology, and where the still more important Origen, who greatly stimulated the study of theology in the Eastern Church, worked. He was the first systematic thinker of Christendom and a man of wide culture. The fathers of monasticism, Hierakas, St Anthony and Pakhom, were, by contrast, Copts without any Greek education.

The great town of Alexandria, ever since its foundation a centre of Greek science and culture, now became a centre of theological thought. Clement and Origen only made a beginning. Arius, from Antioch, and his great opponent Athanasius, were active here; here a great expounder of the scriptures, Didymos the Blind, taught, and here Cyril theologized. The latter, like his predecessor in office, Athanasius, was moreover a powerful, energetic and resolute ecclesiast-politician, such as Alexandria had produced in great numbers, for example, Alexander, Theophilus, and Dioscorus. It shows the importance of the Alexandrian Church that the two great controversies, the Arian and the Christological, which had shaken the early Church to her foundations, came to an end here. The first concerned itself with the relative status of God and Christ, and the second with the relationship of the divine and the human in Jesus Christ. The Alexandrian presbyter, Arius (*Areios*), a very sober thinker, and a well-loved elder in the community, taught that Christ was essentially a being, not by nature resembling God, not eternal, but created from nothing; not God's son by nature, but made so by the grace of God. All this he supported with evidence from the New Testament, and it was very logical but lacking in feeling and without understanding of the needs of Christendom at the time. However, this rationalism attracted a large following in intellectual circles. On the other hand, it conflicted with the genuine and deep longing for redemption among the many simple believers. For them, Christ could only redeem humanity if He were genuinely God, not merely a human being adopted through grace. The Alexandrian Patriarchs sided with the latter, and understood, Athanasius in particular, how to think out and formulate in theological terms this concern with redemption. They claimed for their teaching the title of honour, orthodoxy (right teaching), and after long and very hard struggles, during which Athanasius, for example, was frequently exiled, they succeeded in carrying it through. The reward for this steadfast adherence to the teaching recognized to be right came with the announcement of the edict of the emperor on religion in the year 380, which nominated the Bishop of Alexandria beside the Bishop of Rome as guardian of the true faith.

The second struggle was bound up with power politics within the Church. In the course of the fourth century, Constantinople, the new capital of the empire, was elevated to a Patriarchate, although it could not boast any apostolic founding of its Christian community. That did not suit the Alexandrian dignitaries at all, and a battle flared up the moment



there were theological grounds for it. The Patriarch of Constantinople, Nestorius, consecrated 428, a theologian of the school of Antioch, had attacked the popular name for Mary, the Mother of God (*Theotokos*), because she had borne the human being, Jesus, not the eternal Son of God. Cyril of Alexandria fought bitterly against this, and the Bishop of Rome sided with him. Cyril wanted not only to defeat Nestorius theologically, but also to humiliate him. The second Ecumenical Council of 381 had laid down that the Bishop of Constantinople, as spiritual head of the 'new Rome', should have the place of honour in the Church next to the Bishop of Rome himself, by which Alexandria, the legendary seat of St Mark was lowered to a patriarchate of second rank. This, the imperially recognized guardian of the true faith would not permit, and the accusation of heresy presented him with a means of humbling his brother-in-office at the Golden Horn, and of stripping him of the position of honour which he had usurped. Thereupon violent literary feuds broke out, interlarded on Cyril's part with threats of excommunication. The third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus (AD 431) brought no real solution because the two theological parties remained divided and each banned the other. The Emperor Theodosius II confirmed both banishments, which was either a sign of indifferent impartiality or a clever attempt to get the matter into the hands of the state authorities by eliminating the heads of the religious parties. This, however, did not succeed. Nestorius, it is true, submitted and was sent into exile, but Cyril fled to Egypt and took over his bishopric again as if nothing had happened. And his Church was united behind him. Through his influence at court he also soon succeeded in regaining imperial recognition. His opponent, however, remained deposed and accused of heresy, and was finally even banished to Egypt — and thus placed under his bitter enemy. When the still smouldering struggle was finally settled in the year 433, it was decided in Cyril's favour. Alexandria had defeated Constantinople.

These battles of wits of a theological hue were, as far as we can see, by churchmen of Greek origin and education. The Copts did not contribute any theological thought, but the Coptic monks acted as the Church's reserves. Adhering to the old Christian ascetic principles, but carrying them to excessive lengths, the Coptic converts devised for themselves a radical escape from the world: thinking only of their own spiritual welfare, they withdrew from their villages, at first to places near their homes, subsequently farther and farther into the desert. In this way originated the anchorites or hermits (anchorite — 'He who departs'; hermit — 'he who has gone into the desert' [*eremos*]), and the beginning of monasticism (monk — *monachos* — 'the solitary one'). These men lived lives of severe asceticism and constant prayer, struggling against demons; at first alone, later with imitators and pupils who gathered round them so that colonies of ascetics were formed, principally in the deserts of Scete and Nitria. There were no hard and fast rules and no community life. This movement appears to have begun in the middle of the third century, and much has been hazarded about what gave rise to it, but a final answer is still lacking. Certainly there were many reasons: the rejection of the then still heathen world; the



60 Daniel between the lions.  
Wooden beam from  
the monastery of Bawit

61 Praying man with a cross.  
Fragment of a limestone niche  
from Sheikh Abada







62 A priestly saint, praying. Fragment of a limestone relief



social difficulties of the Copts, from among whom all the early anchorites were drawn; the wish to escape from the persecutions of the Christians (even though it was said of St Anthony that he sought for martyrdom in vain); above all, religious fanaticism which took literally and very seriously the words of Jesus to the young man who had great possessions (*Matt.* 19,21), and other passages from the New Testament. The first of the hermits is considered to be St Anthony, the son of a Christian Coptic family. In the fourth century, besides these anchorites, another form of monkish retreat from the world was initiated by the former soldier, Pakhom, who was also a Copt. Having served his time in the army, he was baptised and at first lived as a hermit. The lack of organization in this life was unable to satisfy him, so after 320 he founded a community of monks in Tabennisi, which was soon followed by a second in Pbou. Here the life of the monks was regulated down to the smallest detail, and absolute obedience was demanded by the leader (*Apa* — *Abt* — Father). Communal work and prayer, communal meals and standard clothing, and above all communal services, were the characteristics of this life, known as the *koinos bios* — communal life, hence coenobitism. By the time of Pakhom's death, there were already nine monasteries and two convents, which were complete enclosed settlements. The monasteries formed an order, with Pbou as centre, where the monastic heads met twice yearly.

After the late fourth century Coenobitic monasticism became united under a still stricter and more military rule by Schenoute of Atripe. It is said that for 83 years he led the White Monastery in Sohag. He too was a Copt, and like most of the monks, knew little or no Greek.

These circles concerned themselves little with theology, but they took an interest in the internal struggles of the Church. St Anthony is reputed to have taken part without success in the Arian controversy. Coenobitic monasticism was above all things faithful and obedient to the Church, that is to say the Patriarch, and it became a force to be reckoned with. And this force was Coptic in its origin. There were few Greeks among the monks, although they included such a notable personality as the former royal tutor, Arsenius. This great Coptic interest in monasticism, which was its contribution to the development of early Christendom, is characteristic. If Eusebius called Egypt a Christian country, his statement must be qualified: it was the Copts who were for the most part Christian. Coptic literature begins with Schenoute, Coptic Bible studies had already begun with Hierakas (late third century), around 350 there were Coptic translations of the Bible in the Sahidic (Theban), Achminic and Faiyumic dialects, and in the fifth century the Bohairic followed. Already during the persecution of Decius (250/1) there had been Coptic martyrs, and in the Diocletian persecution their numbers were very great; now they became active in the struggle against paganism (murder of Hypatia, a neo-platonic philosopher of Alexandria, 415). The Copts were spiritually predisposed towards the new faith: in it they found support for their interest in death and the hereafter and in morality and magic, though this was not always true to the spirit of Christianity. Christianity became



the national religion of the Copts, and Egyptian paganism was forced to retreat (it still held its own in the ancient great temple towns and on the Island of Philae, though there too it had churches as rivals).

It was quite otherwise among the Greek population. Here there was a much more reserved attitude towards the new faith. Proud as they were of their ostensible Hellenism, the Greeks took only very hesitantly to Christianity. It is true that the Alexandrian Church was very strongly and decidedly Greek, but the Greeks in the Nile Valley persisted for the most part in their paganism. In the fourth century one could with good reason call Greeks pagans and Copts Christians. A. von Harnack said in this connection: 'It is also possible that the great mass of the Copts went over to Christianity between 250 and 350, because their own religion had been destroyed or undermined by Hellenism. They took to Christianity in opposition to the religion of their oppressors, the great Hellenic landlords.' The national and social split was thus widened by the religious one.

A characteristic example of the Greek attitude towards Christianity is provided by the town of Antinoopolis (Antinoe, now Sheikh Abada) on the Nile opposite Hermopolis Magna (El Ashmunein). In 130 the Emperor Hadrian founded the town at the place where his favourite, Antinous, was drowned in the Nile. The handsome youth is supposed to have sacrificed his life for the sake of his imperial master, and on this account was made not only the patron of the town, but was identified with Osiris, and was worshipped in a temple built in Egyptian style. The new foundation was from the outset a town, the fourth of its kind in the Nile Valley. It was settled by Greeks from the Faiyum. The imperial founder bestowed upon it — the sole Egyptian community to be so treated — the right of *connubium*, that is, marriage with Egyptians, without the consequent loss of rights by the Greek partner or by the children. In this, Antinoe was fundamentally different from all the other Greek settlements in the country — it was exceptionally open-minded towards that which, in matters of cult and law, was by derivation Egyptian. Nevertheless, the town did not become Coptic. In the reign of the Emperor Valens (364 - 378) Antinoe was still for the most part pagan, so that the emperor, who tended towards Arianism, sent his religious enemies into banishment there when occasion offered, since they would have no contact with orthodox Christians (Theodoret of Cyr-rhus, *Hist. Eccl.* IV, 15). True, there was already a bishop in Antinoe by about 200 (according to Alexander of Jerusalem, in Eusebius, *Hist. Eccl.* VI, 11), and about 325 even two contending holders of this office, one orthodox and one schismatic, but the Christian community never played a prominent part in the town of Osiris-Antinous, as Theodoret's account shows.

So there continued until well into the fifth century — if not longer (unfortunately we do not know exactly) — still very vigorous communities of Greek paganism, which, as the example of Antinoe shows, also preserved Hellenized Egyptian cults. These islands of paganism lay in the ocean of Coptic Christendom, and when they themselves were converted to Christianity, we do not know.



We now come up against the conflict between the Greeks and the Copts in the religious sphere. After the middle of the fifth century, it grew continually more acute. The cause of this was the second phase of the Christological argument. In Constantinople there was an Archimandrite, Eutyches, who was much esteemed at court, but who was sentenced by a synod for heresy in 448. He defended a crude version of Cyril's teaching; according to him there was in Christ, after his incarnation, only one divine-human nature (Monophysitism). His opponents, led by the Patriarch of the capital, advocated on the other hand the indissoluble, but unmixed, co-existence of the divine and the human nature (Diophysitism). Eutyches, who was at the head of the monks of Constantinople, appealed against his sentence to the Pope, the Bishop of Ravenna and the Patriarch of Alexandria. The last-named was at the time Dioscorus (ordained 444), an obstinate, recklessly ambitious and arrogant man. He alone came out on the side of Eutyches, in order to humiliate his brothers-in-office in Constantinople, as once Cyril had humiliated Nestorius. Eutyches was the godfather of the powerful court eunuch, Chrysaphios, with whose scheming help Dioscorus called a synod in Ephesus (449), which was designed to revise the sentence on Eutyches. Dioscorus brought large numbers of his fanatical and completely devoted monks with him. In this way he put such pressure on the members of the Council, that they declared that the teaching of Eutyches was right, and deposed and banished his opponent, the head of the patriarchs of Constantinople. Because of the way in which Dioscorus and his monkish horde behaved, the Pope (Leo the Great) dubbed the Ephesian Council a *Latrocinium* (a band of robbers), a very suitable name for the reign of terror that took place there. Theodosius II confirmed the decision of the synod, Dioscorus seemed to have won the battle, and Alexandria appeared to be at the summit of its ecclesiastical power. The supporters of Dioscorus were installed everywhere, the nepotism of the clerical party was carried to appalling lengths. Then the emperor suddenly died (450). His sister, the Augusta (Empress) Pulcheria, took General Marcian as her spouse, and made him emperor. He was an opponent of the Monophysites. Chrysaphios was executed, and the decree of the Council of 449 was no longer valid. A fourth Ecumenical Council was called in 451 in Chalcedon. Here Dioscorus was deposed and sent into exile by the emperor. Monophysitism was condemned as heresy. Diophysitism became dogma. A tract of Leo the Great (the *Tomos Leontis*) served as the theological basis for the decisions of Chalcedon, for this time Alexandria met opposition from Rome. Without real allies, isolated by the delusions of Dioscorus, it fell from its proud position. Dioscorus, up to then all-powerful and basking in imperial favour, became a wretched exile. Proterios, a Diophysite, became his successor in the chair of St Mark. Dioscorus, who died soon after, was mourned and revered as a martyr by his followers. Constantinople had won.

If the Emperor now hoped for a settlement of the strife, he had not reckoned with Dioscorus' faithful Coptic followers. Greek Christians in Egypt (later known as *Melkites*, that is to say 'royal', or true to the emperor), accepted Chalcedon. The Copts, however,



whose monks had so gloriously forced the decision at the Council of Ephesus (449), did not submit to this judgement. In their eyes, Dioscorus was the guardian of the true faith and Monophysitism the true orthodoxy; it was better suited to their simple mentalities. So the opposition was organized in secret. When Marcian died, there was an insurrection, Proterios was slain in his own church, Timothy Aelurus, one of the organizers of the revolt, was made Patriarch, and the judgement of Chalcedon was ceremoniously rescinded. The Copts would not accept that Dioscorus had done his brother-in-office in Constantinople a great wrong, through pure lust for power; they only saw the supposed wrong that their spiritual leader, revered as a martyr, had suffered at the hands of the 'Greeks'. Hatred against the nation which composed the ruling class in the country was combined with religious hatred. They felt themselves to be overwhelmingly humiliated and violated also where their faith was concerned. Under the banner of the true teaching, Monophysitism, the Copts took up their arms, and did not even shrink from murder in consecrated places. With all the fanaticism of which the Coptic soul was capable, the battle was waged from now on. If in the fourth century the Greeks were still regarded as heathens, now the equation was: Greek equals Diophysite, that is to say a heretic, thus a detestable enemy of the true faith.

The new emperor, Leo I, first intervened in 460. The rebellion was put down, Aelurus deposed, and again a Diophysite was made Patriarch. He maintained his position until 475, then Aelurus returned, following a political coup in Constantinople; in 477 he had to retreat again, since there had been another political change in the capital. When he died, his old companion-in-arms, Peter Mongos, was secretly consecrated as his successor. When in 482, the official Diophysite Patriarch died, Mongos received imperial recognition. From then until 536 there was an unbroken line of Monophysites in Alexandria.

The emperors Zeno (from 482, Henotikon) and Anastasius (from 508, Typos) attempted to win back the Monophysites for the united Church of the empire through compromise, and to suppress the quarrel over Chalcedon. They were not successful in Egypt. When the Emperor Justin I (518) adopted an anti-Monophysite Church policy, the Nile Valley was at first excluded from it, and bishops from Syria found refuge there. This persisted under Justinian I, too; indeed in 535, on the initiative of the Empress Theodora, who was a sympathizer, the Monophysite Theodosius, became Patriarch of Alexandria. But he was not a Copt, so the people rose against him. It did not help him in the least that he was of the same faith; he was a protégé of the Greeks, this was enough to cause him to be rejected. Now race hatred predominated, and it was no longer the faith but the nationality which decided the attitude of the people. Theodosius was driven out, but forcibly reinstated by the army. In 536 he was the victim of a new change in imperial Church policy, and was deposed and banished. Now the feeling of the people turned: the protégé of the Greeks, who up to now had been an enemy, became a professor of the true faith, and, once they had got rid of him, the Copts revered Theodosius until his death, as their lawful head.



The ensuing years are characterized by a confusion that is almost impossible to describe. A Patriarch, Paul of Tabennisi, expropriated Monophysite churches; his successor had to flee from the wrath of the people. The incumbents of St Mark were for the most part orthodox from now on, in accordance with Justinian's Church policy, but many of them took up an intermediate position in order to bridge the gulf. Nevertheless, at the same time a clandestine Monophysite hierarchy, and underground Church movement, came into being, whose members were always ready to detach themselves from the sparse, slowly dwindling official hierarchy, who were supported by the Greek ruling class, and displace them. Theodora, the wife of the strictly orthodox Justinian, set the chain of events in motion; on her initiative, two Syrian Monophysites, Jacob Baradaï and John of Arabia, were consecrated as bishops. From 553 onwards Jacob Baradaï consecrated Monophysite bishops in Egypt, and in 575, even a patriarch was consecrated in secret (because of the influence of Baradaï, the Monophysite organization was called the 'Jacobite Church'). From then on there was an uninterrupted line of Monophysite patriarchs. At first they resided in a monastery because Alexandria was closed to them. It is true that not all the emperors after Justinian supported orthodoxy and persecuted the Monophysites with the same ardour — from Coptic sources we know, for example, that the Emperor Tiberius II (578 - 582) endowed Monophysite churches, some of them even for martyrs (John of Nikiou, *Chron.* 94, 19) — but they did not receive official recognition.

The last severe conflict between the Greek imperial Church and Coptic Monophysitism took place in the seventh century. In the year 619, the armies of the Sassanian Persians had overrun Egypt. The Copts immediately went over to them, opened the doors of Alexandria to them, helped them to conquer the whole of Egypt and to drive the Greeks from the country. Their hatred of everything Greek found an outlet for the first time. Centuries of oppression, exploitation and cultural exclusion had allowed this animosity to take deep root. For the last century and a half, the Greeks had been not only the rich, the great landowners, the tax-collectors and the occupants of the high official positions, but in addition, the heretics, the persecutors of the 'true believers', as the Monophysites called themselves, oppressors in every way and now in the religious sense as well. It seemed to the Copts that any other rule, even if it were not Christian, would be better and more bearable. Ten years later, the Emperor Heraclius succeeded in winning back the Nile Valley. He appointed as Patriarch, Cyrus of Asia Minor and at the same time gave him the authority of an imperial governor. This was an unfortunate choice. The emperor wanted to mediate between the Monophysites and the Diophysites, as the strife between them endangered the unity of the empire. As a suitable compromise, he and his court theologians declared that Christ comprised two natures with only one will (Monothelitism). The compromise was to work in this way: on the one hand the teaching of Chalcedon regarding the two natures was kept, but on the other — a step towards Monophysitism, at least in one very important respect — the fusing of the two natures into one was to be taught. This was bad theology because it was indecisive. And Cyrus put



it over badly; he had not realized that points of dogma no longer played an important part in the dispute. He was himself hated as a Greek and a representative of the emperor. Monotheletism was turned down because it came from the Greeks. Cyrus tried to enforce the Church policy of his emperor, which was well-meant in itself. In doing so he only intensified, with astonishing short-sightedness, the hatred of the Copts for himself, the empire and the Greeks. What he did aggravated the situation to such an extent that the combined efforts of the Copts towards national, social and ecclesiastical independence led anew to actions that would finally settle the fate of the country, which was so immensely important and valuable to the empire.

In the year 640, for the first time the champions of Allah and his prophet, Mahomet, crossed the borders of Egypt and began to conquer the country for the great new Arab Empire. At once, the Copts went over to the side of the Arabs and Alexandria was lost again. A Byzantine army succeeded once again in winning the capital city back in the year 645, but in the following year the Arabs finally entered Alexandria, aided by treachery (probably on the Coptic side). With that, the Roman-Byzantine rule in the Nile Valley came to an end after lasting for almost 700 years. The attitude of the Copts was the logical result of Cyrus' policy. They saw in the Islamic conquerors the long-awaited liberators from the hated Greek yoke, and went over unreservedly to them. With their help the Greeks were for the most part driven out of the country.

In order to complete the picture, a few details regarding the position of the Church in Egypt remain to be added. Although the people were prevented from reaching the high levels of culture and civilization of the rest of the empire, there was one way in which they constantly came into contact with the Christian culture of other provinces: the Nile Valley was visited by numerous pilgrims. Many pilgrim ships touched at the port of Alexandria on their way to the Holy Land, and from there it was easy to visit the places of pilgrimage in the hinterland. Above all, there were the colonies of anchorites in the Nitrian and Theban deserts, which were visited by many important people from western Christendom. Then there were the places that were associated with Joseph and Moses. Shrines of the archangels, originally no doubt founded by the Jews, and the places where Jesus had stayed or was said to have stayed on the flight from Bethlehem, were other favourite goals of the pilgrims. Many of them were connected with miracles of healing, which naturally made them more popular. And, above all, the shrines of the martyrs were visited, in the first place that of St Menas, west of Alexandria (here a whole pilgrimage town was excavated) and Menuthis, north-east of the Egyptian capital. Isis was once the cult goddess here, revered as a healer and an oracle. In order to undermine her cult, the Patriarch Cyril brought the bones of two alleged martyrs, Cyrus and John, from the Church of St Mark in Alexandria. Although this was apparently a pious fraud, and two hundred years later the legends of the transplanted saints were not quite believed in (Sophronius, *Laudes Ss Cyri et Ioannis*), the new shrine soon became very popular, all the more so since numerous miraculous cures were reported from there (Sophronius con-











sidered the miracles to be convincing evidence of the genuineness of the martyrs). Unfortunately it has completely disappeared. Its saints appeared again later in Rome and in Epidaurus in the Peloponnese (in the west Cyrus becoming Abbacyrus). Thus Egypt was also a popular and frequently visited place of pilgrimage, though naturally it could not compete with the Holy Land.

And one thing more: there are very remarkable accounts from the early Islamic period, to the effect that individual monks in the Monastery of Bawit could buy their cells (always consisting of separate little houses, sometimes of several rooms), and had an inheritable right of possession to them. We know of no parallel to this, and unfortunately we also do not know for certain whether, before the Islamic conquest, the monastery was used by Greek or Monophysite monks.

This broad, but nevertheless very brief, historical outline was necessary because it gives us the key to many of the phenomena of so-called Coptic art. First it teaches us that we must differentiate between the art of the 'Greeks' in the country and that of the Copts, because these two groups of people were sharply divided by their legal, social and cultural status, as later on they were also divided by their religious or sectarian attitudes. This explains some things that otherwise would appear strange. People have often wondered why so much of the classical antique heritage was assimilated, at least as regards the subjects of the works, and why there is so little ancient Egyptian influence to be detected; why the gods and their semi-divine or heroic following are Greek, and only those Egyptian gods appear that had been adopted by the Greeks, Isis, in particular. But it is only necessary to remember that the majority of artistic works were made for and by Egyptian Greeks. Again, it was asked what, for example, Daphne was doing in Christian surroundings, and what significance her presence there had. But this is easily explained by the fact that this surrounding world was, until well into the fifth century, Christian only in so far as it was Coptic. The Greeks, as we saw, were still not Christians, so for them to portray this nymph is not surprising. Also the heterogeneous nature of all that is designated 'Coptic Art' now becomes comprehensible. We are after all concerned with artistic works of both Greek and Coptic origins. And taking into account the historical circumstances, we can scarcely expect the works of the Greeks to be uniform, since the Greek settlements were not situated close to each other in the vicinity of Alexandria or in the Nile Delta, but were scattered over the whole gigantic length of the fertile river valley. Whilst we know with certainty that they had close contacts with each other, making use of the river, needless to say within the narrow circle of each settlement the development of its own local style was nevertheless possible. There could also be an exchange of local artistic practices, so that what was Coptic might be taken over by the Greeks. It is possible to speak of occasional Roman influences, since there were always Roman officials and soldiers in the country. Above all, the Copts took over some things, perhaps even many, from the Greeks, in the creation of their own folk art; in their hands, however, what was taken over changed and was adapted to suit a different



cultural level. In this way arose the colourful, apparently confused picture of 'Coptic art', of which only a very small part is in the true sense Coptic at all. Most of it is the late antique art of Egypt and has nothing to do with the Copts. This is one thing that we have learnt from this short glance at the history of Roman Egypt.

## LARGE SCULPTURE

We have gone a long way towards answering the question as to whether H. Zalusker was right in classifying 'Coptic art' as a folk art. Before we continue, something should be said briefly about this term, which is not used in any derogatory sense. She merely claims that this art has its source in a soil other than that of the so-called 'great art', or, to employ a happy phrase of Strzygowski's, 'official art'. This is, as commissioned art, supported by the political or ecclesiastical powers of its time. Its function is to represent historical or cult events, and to give the impression and meaning to buildings, funerary monuments, etc., which is desired by those who commission them. It must convert political, social or religious ideology into artistic forms. It must express ideas by the style and content of its works which incline the thoughts of the observer in the direction desired by the commissioning powers. A theologian once described 'glorification' as the essential task of Christian art (H. Vogel); one can extend this term to all sorts of 'official art', the tomb of a pharaoh, the frieze of the Parthenon, a statue of a Roman emperor, the funerary monument of a medieval ruler, or the picture of a dictator in a present-day office; they all serve in the same way to glorify the person represented — what distinguishes these examples from each other is merely how and by whom the person is glorified. And to glorify — among other aims — is also the task of all religious art. So the 'official art' of all times and peoples has historical connections, often still identifiable today; it has a spiritual message that is still clear and a background that we can understand. According to Strzygowski, most of the surviving ancient Egyptian works are classic examples of this 'official art'. Hence it was also possible to portray pharaohs, Ptolemies, and Roman emperors in the same manner, since the Greek, like the Roman rulers of the Nile Valley, took over the Egyptian idea of royalty.

We must look elsewhere for the sources of folk art. They come from the daily life of the people in all its aspects, and in it the religious feelings and aspirations of the people are expressed. At the same time, every folk art is continually stimulated by great art, taking styles and motifs from it and adapting them in its own way. On the other hand it can occasionally, especially in times of rapid social changes, have an influence upon great art, and give it something of its character. One of the characteristics of a folk art is that

65 Late Roman Emperor. Painted limestone portrait head

66 Head of a bearded man. Limestone

67 Portrait of a man. Marble

68 Portrait of a young girl. Limestone









69 Victory. Limestone statuette  
(table support?)



there is little, if any, large sculpture. What is the position in late antique Egypt? In conformity with late antique and early Byzantine usage, there were certainly likenesses of the reigning emperor, not only in the capital, Alexandria, but also in the other towns and leading places of the districts. Very few of these survive. An impressive porphyry bust in the Cairo Museum represents a ruler of the early fourth century, perhaps Maximinus Daia, the last persecutor of Christians in Egypt. The stone comes from an Egyptian quarry and the bust was long considered to be characteristically Coptic. But through the researches of L'Orange on the history of late antique portraiture, we now know that the characteristic style of this bust is that of the imperial art of its period, that is to say, of the Tetrarchy, and not specifically Coptic. What here appears to be harder and more summarily executed than in other examples from other parts of the empire of the same period, should rather be attributed to the hardness of the stone than to a particular artistic style. For comparison there is the head of an emperor from Qena, now in the Berlin Museum. So far it has been impossible to identify, and thus cannot be exactly dated. All that is certainly known is that it is late antique, and was very probably made before the time of Constantine. It is of limestone, painted to look like porphyry. It cannot be classified under any of the known styles of the late antique. The very smooth face, only roughly finished, lacks individuality; only the very straight mouth with its thin lips has a certain character. The corners of the eyes are lengthened as far as the temples with deep rectangular lines (the eyes, like these lines, were originally filled in, probably with glass paste), a clear link with ancient Egyptian sculpture. A wreath of laurels, of which the centre piece is broken away, adorns his head, and shows the likeness to be that of an emperor. These two heads are in no way characteristic of 'Coptic art'. The porphyry bust in Cairo is an official work in the style of the imperial art under the Tetrarchy; the other, with its slightly Egyptian look, one might perhaps imagine was made in Egypt to replace a damaged official work, or for a town that had no official portrait of the emperor to venerate, but whose inhabitants wished to possess one. Judging from the style, the sculptor was a Greek settled in the country; he has adopted that of the Ptolemies and of early imperial times in Egypt, although in a very restrained way, and it is therefore still a little in the tradition of Egyptian 'official art'. Both these works belong without any doubt to this 'official art'.

Plate 63

Plate 65

Strzygowski has given convincing reasons for assuming that the two pairs of emperors on the south-west corner of St Mark's in Venice are also late antique works from the Nile Valley. They are likenesses of the four emperors of the first Tetrarchy, and must therefore date from between 293 and 305. The two groups are made of Egyptian porphyry, and the emperors are wearing the uniform of generals. These porphyry groups were probably made for a garrison or a military shrine. Here too we are dealing with art in the service of the court or the army; 'official art' in the fullest sense of the word. And here too the style has nothing specifically 'Coptic' about it; it is much more that of imperial art (close parallels occur in Salona and Dalmatia). There are two similar groups

Plate 64



of tetrarchs now in the Biblioteca Vaticana, only they are much uglier, and represent the emperors with distinctly simian faces.

Plate 67 Apart from these few surviving examples of 'official art' from Egyptian workshops, there is very little large sculpture from late antique Egypt. One could point to the modelled stucco mummy portraits from Antinoe, etc., they do not however belong to the sphere of real sculpture, but to that of funerary art, since they are not true sculpture, being bound up with the mummy. In the Brooklyn Museum there is a marble portrait head from Egypt; its exact place of origin is unknown. It is unusually broad and bloated, with a very flat nose, small and widely spaced eyes, and a pursed mouth with protruding underlip. A repellently brutal, suspicious and ugly face of great individuality, it is a genuine and completely unflattering portrait. It is not quite clear for what purpose this head, which is only 10.5 cms high, was made. The hair-style makes the early fourth century a likely date. The merciless portrayal of a very unpleasant and unique personality leads us to classify this as a Roman work; and the imported material points to work commissioned by a member of the upper class. Although we can detect completely provincial traits in this likeness, it belongs nevertheless to the development of late Roman portraiture and not to the art native to Egypt.

Plate 66 A limestone head in Dumbarton Oaks, which is perhaps just as far from life-size (15 cms high), gives a different impression. Its provenance too is unknown. The narrow face with the asymmetrical, slanting eyes, the long, thin nose and slightly smiling mouth, has a truly ironical expression. The hair, combed over the forehead and cut into a ragged fringe, as well as the long moustache and beard are given very coarse strands. This little head makes one think of an old follower of Bacchus, and yet the general impression is that of a portrait. Towards the middle of the fifth century, heads of this small size, with similarly depicted hair and beards, were also fashionable in 'great art'. Most closely resembling the Dumbarton Oaks head, in spite of the differences in workmanship, is a piece brought to Vienna from Ephesus. It is true that the ironic twist to the mouth was no longer employed in portraiture at this period, and a morose, bad-tempered impression is given, but it does appear in the immediately preceding phase of eastern Roman portraiture. Thus it seems as if a sculptor in one of the Greek settlements on the Nile had created a little portrait in imitation of the style of the fifth century. It shows in an unpretentious yet impressive manner the wise, mocking and sophisticated face of an elderly man. The little head shows us that the Greeks in Egypt were also aware of the changing styles in the art of the Empire, and sought to adopt them whenever it was possible and wherever there was a sculptor who was sufficiently gifted to do so. There is a very great artistic difference between this and the head from Ephesus, beside which our piece is downright provincial, but it does show that all connections with the great artistic centres had not been broken off. Unfortunately, we do not know whether Alexandria was still a centre for the art of portraiture, and, if so, what style this art followed; on the evidence of our little head we may conjecture that it had much in common with imperial art.











Our knowledge of busts, and statuettes — since in general no late antique statues have been found in Egypt — is confined to purely provincial work, quite alien to late Roman art and uninfluenced by it. Two examples may be given. A small, painted female bust from Antinoe, with all its colour well preserved, is now in the Ikonenmuseum at Recklinghausen. The piece may come from a funerary chapel. We cannot even roughly date it from its style since the folds of the garment have been rendered as completely parallel and purely ornamental wavy lines, the proportions are quite inaccurate (observe the arms and hands!) and the surface of the face with its large eyes is flat, undetailed and expressionless. It is more like the plan of a female face than a personal portrait. There are only two details which suggest an approximate date: the wreath of hair encircling the forehead and temples beneath the cap somewhat resembles the hair-style brought in by Helena, the famous mother of Constantine the Great (except that that of the empress was thicker and broader, probably padded out with false hair); whilst the shaping of the eyes with the moulded circle denoting the iris, and the hollow for the pupil, is, though in a simplified form, that of the Cairo porphyry bust of the emperor. Both details indicate a probable date in the early fourth century. In the Greek town of Antinoe there were therefore some ladies who followed the court fashions, and the sculptors took over one feature when rendering the human face in imitation of the style of the empire, that is all. The great majority of those employed as sculptors or craftsmen by the Greek inhabitants of Egypt were obviously satisfied with a provincial style that changed little. This style shows pronounced characteristics of folk art in the stylization and completely unnatural representation of the folds of the garment, and the impersonal type of face. The modest size too (the bust is only 26.5 cms high) is characteristic. Of similar date and style as this bust is the head of a girl, now in Berlin, provenance unknown, but which comes from a milieu at least very similar to, if not the same as the Recklinghausen bust. The round, cheerful-looking little face is dominated by the huge eyes, which very much resemble those of the lady from Antinoe. The hair falls on the shoulders, carefully curled, but in an artificial style, and is bound with two ribbons. This is not a fashionable court coiffure, it suggests rather a simple young girl, who is not yet obliged to wear her hair in a complicated fashion. But the face is no different from the Recklinghausen lady's, each gives the same timelessly young and impersonal impression; both lack character and individuality. In this they differ greatly from the other works briefly discussed above. But the principles of folk art are observed: personality is subordinated to the type, and a realistic likeness is not attempted nor is any impression of the age of the subject. It would be possible to speak of an idealization of the subject, conveying a rarefied impression of untouched youth in which all personality is suppressed. But we can really only call these faces types: the Recklinghausen bust shows a woman, the little head from Berlin a girl. The sculptor did not intend to express more than this.

*Plate III*

*Plate 68*

We have already set two statuettes in place in our imaginary museum: one in antique style which is very definitely a portrait, and which we recognized as a work by a Greek

*Plate 7*



- Plate 8 sculptor from the beginning of the late antique period, the other a stylized work, which we presume to be Coptic. The head of the boy in Cairo is a likeness, the face of the figure in Recklinghausen that of a primitive idol. Beside these two extremely contrasted figures we can place another — more ambitious in size, being 71.2 cms high — representing a *Nike* (Victory), provenance unknown, which is now in Dumbarton Oaks. The pathetically stiff figure leans against a pillar; perhaps a misunderstood memory of an ancient Egyptian style. The stonemason — it would be too much to speak of a sculptor — has attempted to represent a slightly striding movement. But he is just as unsuccessful with the proportions as he is with anatomical details. The winged goddess of victory wears an extremely short, belted tunic, which leaves the right breast uncovered. The folds produce a parallel channelled effect. The large face with the staring eyes looks almost like a Celtic mask. The raised arms (the left is broken away), and the abrupt break in the supporting pillar suggest that the piece was once the centre support of a table. Tables of this kind, with carved figures as supports, or figures as part of the centre support, are known from the Hellenic world. The theme and possible function of this piece are therefore antique and Greek, but the execution is woefully inferior. It does not give a general impression of the antique, and looks decidedly peasant-like. But the Hellenistic principles of figure representation were rightly understood, if not properly used; this is shown by the forward movement and the decoratively raised arms, and in spite of the primitive workmanship, we can tell that the craftsman to whom we owe this *Nike* was of Greek provincial origin. His not very victorious looking victory-goddess shows us what Hellenistic art could become in the remote provinces.
- Plate IV Beside this piece of stiff provincial Greek sculpture the little votive figure which recently came into the possession of the Recklinghausen Ikonenmuseum seems like an aboriginal idol of primitive strength and genuine archaism. This figure of a praying woman, no more than 23.5 cms high, is of baked clay covered with stucco and then painted. 'The figure is as flat as a board; only the large nose and the breasts are modelled. The over-large head, with widely opened eyes under high thick eyebrows determines its whole appearance; the moulded nose with hollowed nostrils is strongly curved in profile. The short hair, lying close to the face, is drawn with black, yellow and red inner strokes, and is integral with the ears, which are pierced and are adorned with large hanging ornaments, consisting of five beads. The beads are made of green glass and carnelian. The dress is a long-sleeved tunic, with a broad border at the neck, both the *clavi* and the band at the hem being filled with geometrical patterns. Anklets are indicated above the turned-out feet. The reverse side is merely painted white.' (H. W. Müller). The little figure comes from Behnasa. Müller has rightly described it as 'very rare' of its kind. We know similar though mostly much more three-dimensional figures as votive offerings from various shrines of Coptic Egypt, principally from Abu Mina, the desert sanctuary of Menas. There the peculiar way in which the breasts and nose are made to project often occurs, but the rest of the body is hardly ever left so flat. Statuettes of this



kind were obviously dedicated in gratitude for a healing miracle or the granting of some other request by the patron saint of the shrine, and their use shows the continuance far into Christian times of an ancient custom practised over the whole Mediterranean area. We can probably regard this piece as Christian, because its unmistakable affinity with the votive statuettes from Abu Mina shows it to be Coptic work. Though at first glance it looks like the forerunner of a ginger-bread man, this in itself shows us that we are dealing with a folk art as primitive as it is carefree. The votive figure betrays neither antique nor ancient Egyptian influence. It is a moving as well as a stern and devout symbol of a grateful piety, which is beginning to create its own, still quite artlessly childish and completely stylized human image. Funerary stelae, such as that of Rhodia, are closely related to it in spirit. By concentrating on the concept 'praying woman' its creator has endowed it with primeval strength.

## FUNERARY STELAE

Though portraiture did not play an important part in the late antique art of Egypt, examples of sculptured likenesses have come down to us through a large group of sculpture in a quite personal sphere: that is to say, through funerary stelae, very large quantities of which have fortunately survived and are to be found in all big collections of Coptic art. The funerary stelae seem to have originated from two sources: from Greek culture, to which we owe so many monuments of great artistic merit and deep sincerity, and from the Roman military tombstones, which we know from all provinces of the Roman Empire. One would expect that the sarcophagus, the descendant, as it were, of the mummy-case, would be much in evidence as it became increasingly popular in Roman art from the second century onwards; and indeed sarcophagi, important evidence of early Christian art, have been found in Rome, the rest of Italy and Gaul. But we know of no sculptured examples from the Egyptian late antique. It is the funerary stele which is predominant. Its form and decoration are not uniform, for its treatment varies widely according to the place of origin.

We know of Roman tombstones from Egypt. For example, the stele of an official which comes from Kom el-Rahib and dates from the second century, is now exhibited in the Coptic Museum. In a narrow arcade, which consists of two slender, somewhat outward-curving columns with foliate capitals and a very flat arch decorated with laurels, the deceased stands in travel garb, holding a staff loosely in his right hand which is raised in front of his body, and with a garland hanging from his lowered left hand. We know of such garlands or wreaths, at all events festoons of flowers, from mummy portraits from the Faiyum, which are often surprisingly true-to-life masterpieces of Hellenistic panel painting from Roman imperial times; the garlands originate from the Greek cult of the dead. The man's face is noticeable because of his protruding ears, otherwise he

*Plate 70*



has not much individuality. It is completely in the tradition of Roman tombstones from the provinces. Funerary stelae of this kind principally derive from the second century and the first years of the third, and they are always dedicated to Romans. Their artistic achievement seldom rises above the level seen here, they are comparable with Roman provincial sculpture as a whole, and we may guess that a stonemason from the legions created this one.

*Plate 71* Of more artistic merit and at the same time more of a portrait, is another tombstone, now in Cairo, which represents a somewhat different type. Let into a flat pillar, which has a pointed top like an obelisk, is a long rectangular niche containing the three-quarter figure of an elderly man in a tunic and pallium. A certain hardness in the folds of the garments and the rather coarse execution of the hands betray the provincial sculptor, but one can recognize in the face, even though it is treated in a rather summary way and is not very detailed, the historical personality of the subject. Certainly, this funerary stele does not belong to great art in the classical sense, but it is a very good and thoroughly characteristic example of Roman provincial art.

*Plate 75* Apart from these Roman stelae, we know of others also which are quite undoubtedly pure Egyptian. For example, in Kom Abu Billu, the necropolis of ancient Terenuthis several hundred stelae of two main types have been excavated. By far the larger group shows one or two praying figures. An example of this class is in the Ikonenmuseum at Recklinghausen, and is extremely characteristic of this kind of stele. The man, Kollouthion by name, stands in a typically Egyptian attitude: the legs as far as the hips are represented completely in side view, whereas the upper part of the body and face are turned directly towards the front. His little daughter stands behind him in exactly the same attitude, and is differentiated from her father not by her clothing, but solely by her hair style. Their faces, particularly that of the father, are very reminiscent of ancient Egyptian portraits from about the Amarna period. The folds of the garments of both the deceased are cut in very narrow and parallel lines, and only where the cloaks are drawn across the body do they also run radially; the impression is almost that of fluting on a pillar. Both figures raise their arms in prayer in exactly the same way. F. A. Hooper has made a special study of the stelae from Kom Abu Billu. All known examples have been certainly dated through the discovery of coins from between 268 and 340 — a piece of quite unusual good fortune for late antique Egypt, only made possible through the methodical excavation of the necropolis. They are pagan without exception. Religious symbols do indeed occur occasionally; where they do so, however, they have been incorporated in ancient Egyptian motifs. What clearly separates them from all that we otherwise know of late antique Egypt is that many of them, including the piece in Recklinghausen, are worked in so-called low relief. That is to say, outlines of the figures are deeply engraved in the surface of the stone; then the figures are modelled in rather flat relief inside these contour lines, which, at their highest level (for example, the nose and chin), just reach the original surface of the slab. The smoothed surface of the stone remains round the figures



IV Praying woman. Votive figure from Behnasa, clay covered with painted stucco

thus worked in the stele, so that it appears as if the relief is sunk into it. This technique is alien to the antique; it is of ancient Egyptian origin, and in the Amarna period particularly, it led to some of the most magnificent Egyptian reliefs that we know. Having regard to the ancient Egyptian prototypes, we may assume that the stelae from Kom Abu Billu were also painted; certain details, particularly the very indistinctly formed eyes, require just the finishing touch that a brush could give. These stelae are without doubt in an ancient Egyptian tradition, which is shown, apart from the attitude of the figures, by the technique. Certainly these two attributes are not retained throughout this group; rather, the antique position without the break in the figure establishes itself gradually, while the low relief technique disappears with time. We can therefore establish that this originally purely Egyptian group became gradually antique in style. Their religious content, it must be added was not altered by this. The question now is whether we are concerned with funerary reliefs for Egyptians or Greeks. M. C. C. Edgar classified the few pieces that he knew unhesitatingly among Greek sculptures. Since Hooper's investigation, we know from the much greater wealth of material that, while it is true that the personal names are for the most part Greek, only Egyptian month names occur. If this inclines one to suppose that the stelae were made for Egyptians, the Redklinghausen





example only serves to confirm it. For the name Kollouthion occurs very seldom, and then solely for Egyptians. In the stelae from Kom Abu Billu, therefore, we may see evidence of an independent late Egyptian art still existing in the latter part of the third century and the first half of the fourth. They also give us evidence for the first time in Egypt of the orans on funerary stelae (the attitude of prayer with uplifted arms and the palms of the hands turned towards the front), which later became so popular.

*Plate 74* We have already mentioned that the traditional Egyptian style of relief did not endure, but became gradually antique. To this group belongs the second, much rarer type of stele, of which we choose an example obtained in the art market. These funerary slabs are no longer placed upright, but lie horizontally. They depict, towards the right, a simple couch upon which the deceased lies — in our case a woman and child. To one side, at the foot of the sofa, stand two men in an attitude of prayer (the child also raises its arms in the same gesture). Probably this is a representation of a family bidding farewell to the dying mother, which at the same time immortalizes the prayers of intercession at the deathbed. The style is much coarser than that of the Recklinghausen stele. There is a lack of proportion here and there, the folds of the garments are stiffly ornamental, and the faces are types without personality. A distinct degeneration of artistic skill has set in, which is perhaps also due to the change over to an unaccustomed technique and style. This type is faintly reminiscent of the representations of family meals, with or without the deceased, which were so popular in Roman funerary art, and particularly widespread in the provinces. It is true that no meal is depicted here, but the arrangement is reminiscent of the Roman type. The woman does indeed hold a round object in her right hand, which may perhaps be intended for an apple or a pomegranate, but this is not intended to recall a repast, but is a symbol which often appears in Egyptian funerary art. So the composition of the new scene may perhaps have been based on a provincial Roman precedent, but it retains its own ideas.

Now that we have examined a few notable examples of Roman provincial and Egyptian funerary stelae with figures, an unusually lucky circumstance enables us also to get to know the types of stelae in use from one of the places settled by the Greeks. During the last few years, funerary stelae of different kinds have been coming on to the art market from Sheikh Abada, the ancient Antinoe, in increasing numbers. The plastic art of the town founded by Hadrian has been made available to us on a scale which only a very few places in the Nile Valley can equal. Without question the source of this sudden supply — no fakes have been established up till now, and, as far as I know, Coptic sculpture in stone as a whole has not yet been faked (though this may come, seeing it is now so much in fashion) — we will just gratefully avail ourselves of it. There is a type of stele from the third century which is quite clearly connected with Roman stelae. We choose *Plate 72* as an example a piece from the art market: two slender pillars with foliate capitals support an arch with a simple outline, not quite semicircular, immediately below the right-angled top of the stele. Very tightly fitted into the niche stands a youth in a very short

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tunic, which looks almost as though he had grown out of it. His face with its large eyes is smooth and without personality, but is nevertheless not lacking in a certain beauty. The hands hanging down at the sides are turned palms forward; the whole figure has an air of delicate resignation. The stele is painted in full colour. The facial type is quite closely connected with the carved mummy masks from Antinoe, which date to the second and third centuries and have long been known to us. There is no religious symbolism. Why the Greeks of Antinoe departed from the custom of mummy burial, which they had taken over from the Egyptians, is not clear.

Another group of stelae belonging to about the same time, perhaps extending into the early fourth century, have come to light in considerable numbers over the last few years. They all show a youthful figure in a niche. It crouches there in an odd attitude, usually on a cushion, one leg lying flat, the other raised. With one exception, they all show youths in short, apparently belted tunics. In one hand they hold a bunch of grapes, in the other, an animal, usually a dove; though in one instance it was a puppy and in another a frog. All these stelae are painted. As an example we reproduce a piece in Recklinghausen. H. W. Müller has shown that these crouching figures must derive from the Isis cult. In the town of Osiris-Antinous this is not surprising as the Isis religion attracted large numbers of Greeks — and later also Romans and provincials under their rule — and the name of the town was incorporated with that of its patron Osiris, the spouse of Isis. The dove pertains to Isis because in the confusion of late religions (syncretism) she was also equated with Aphrodite, the dog is her sign because the Dog Star (Sirius) is her star, and the frog is an ancient Egyptian symbol of resurrection; the position of the crouching figures is that of Harpocrates, as the Greeks called Horus, the son of Isis and Osiris. Thus all the symbols used here are in accordance with the Isis cult, including the bunch of grapes, which has no Christian connection here, but is a symbol of Dionysos, with whom Osiris could be identified in the syncretism. In style some of these Isis-mystery stelae are much coarser than the standing boy, but they belong clearly and unmistakably to the same artistic convention. A feature they all have in common, is the face totally lacking in personality or individuality, betraying no trace of age, or experience of life. The type 'Youth' is repeated again and again with small divergences, which are due more to the varying skill of the people working on the stelae than to the individual characteristics of the subjects. We have no idea whether all those who are depicted as part of the Isis mystery, really did die young. It is quite possible, even likely, that the deceased is equated here with Harpocrates, the son of Isis, and this led to the choice of a youthful ideal type, and to the suppression of everything personal, individual or characteristic. Artistically, these stelae are not, for the most part, of a very high quality. Often they are clumsily finished, the proportions are seldom correct (in particular, the heads are enormous), and the folds of the garments are far from realistic. It is very average provincial work that we are concerned with here, and the charm of these specimens of folk art lies more in their content than their form. They cannot be compared with the stelae from Kom

*Plate V*



Abu Billu, at least not with the older, Egyptian-style examples which produced the low relief; rather more perhaps with the later works.

*Plate 77* A piece in Recklinghausen shows us yet another type. On a horizontal stone slab laid in front of a vertical slab, stands a fat, thick-set youth, dressed like the boy standing in the niche (72); in his left hand he clasps a bunch of grapes; in his right hand, which hangs at his side, he holds a green painted, sausage-shaped object, which is probably intended to represent — the only likely interpretation — the garland or wreath which we know from mummy portraits from the Faiyum, and which derives from Greek death symbolism. This stele was apparently never enclosed, and from this we must suppose that it was set up in a funerary chapel on a pedestal or bench. In style it is so near to that of the Isis mystery stelae that it must date from the same period.

A change in style first appears in the first quarter of the fourth century. It is exemplified in the bust of a young woman which also probably came from a funerary chapel. What is new is the way the eyes are formed; previously they had been painted, but now they have circular modelled pupils, which in fact detracts somewhat from their naturalness. They tend to give a goggle-eyed appearance. As an example of this new style, which of course also extended to funerary stelae, let us take that of a young girl. She stands in a niche which is composed of pillars decorated in a complicated way, and a shell (the arch is broken away), and holds her funerary wreath with both hands in front of her body. This stele is of somewhat better workmanship, and better proportioned than the older ones, but fundamentally there is not much change. Its provincality is only slightly modified.

*Plate III*

The new style reappears with unimpaired vigour in a Christian work which is in the Esch Collection. It is one of the few Christian examples from Sheikh Abada; the youth in the niche holds a small cross in his raised right hand, the left lies across his body without any symbol or attribute. This relief was apparently not intended to be free-standing, but was made to be let into a wall; it is probably a funerary relief nevertheless. It can hardly be earlier than the late fourth century, because, as we saw, the town was still almost completely heathen until 370. If we take the young woman's bust, probably dating from the time of Constantine, which we have discussed, and place it beside the figure of the Christian boy, who in all probability is two generations earlier than she is, we can see how limited the development of style in this provincial folk art was. Completely unaffected by the variations in imperial art between the time of the Tetrarchs and Theodosius, the art of Antinoe remained stationary at the level it had reached at the beginning of the fourth century. Neither the 'beautiful style' of Roman art, which produced impressive and admirable works in the middle of the century, nor the renaissance of the time of Theodosius the Great and his sons with their sometimes very austere conceptions, was reflected in any way in the style or subject of the sculpture of the Greek-settled provinces of the middle Nile, which remained monotonously the same. Folk art has its own tempo.

*Plate 76*

94 It does not constantly conform to the variations in style of 'official art', it is self-



0 Man in travelling clothes.  
Limestone funerary stele

1 Bust of an elderly man.  
Limestone funerary stele



2 Standing youth.  
Painted limestone  
funerary stele  
from Sheikh Abada



3 Girl with a wreath.  
Painted limestone  
funerary stele  
from Sheikh Abada







74 Reclining woman with  
child and two  
praying figures.  
Limestone funerary relief  
from Kom Abu Billu



75 Praying man  
(Kollouthion)  
with his daughter.  
Limestone funerary relief  
from Kom Abu Billu



sufficient, and shows no perceptible development over long periods, only occasionally taking up a new form by means of a mutative leap, as it were. This art was practised in a settlement attuned to Greek culture and in a town which certainly had its own gymnasium, and however far the inhabitants were from being true Hellenes, they had a Hellenistic education open to them. In view of the sculpture produced in Osiris-Antinous, which was not an unattainable distance from the great centre of Alexandria, we can almost understand why J. Strzygowski took such work for Coptic (it is true he did not yet know of this sculpture from Sheikh Abada, but was very positive about thus labelling that from Ahnas, which basically did not look very different, as we shall see). And since the works from Greek Egypt were so artistically feeble, one cannot help wondering what the late Coptic world was able to achieve.

We have nothing to put forward for Antinoe and its Coptic surroundings, as monuments are lacking. However, we can answer this question as regards another region predominantly settled by Greeks, the Faiyum. This oasis, with Lake Moeris (now Lake Karun) as its middle point, contained many Greek towns. The leading town of the district was Arsinoe, the modern Medinet el-Faiyum. From this town comes the tender and moving relief of the Madonna nursing her Child, now in Berlin, which we have already shown to be one of the finest expressions of Greek artistic style found in late antique Egypt. The Leningrad stele with the figure of a praying woman, with its noticeable attempt to balance the standing figure in the antique style, also came from the Faiyum, though we do not know its exact provenance. As this stele already shows a Christian woman, it cannot be of very early origin. It is true that in 325 there was already a Christian bishop in Arsinoe, who belonged to the austere Melitian sect which had broken away from the main Church and there also, according to a somewhat uncertain report, the great heretic, Valentinus, was born in the second century. He combined the oriental cosmogony of Gnosticism with the conceptions of Greek philosophers into a prodigious but fantastic system.

*Plate 5*

*Plate 3*

But we have no evidence that Christianity had very strong roots in the Greek-settled part of the Faiyum, or that it was very widespread there. It is more a question of knowing that the Coptic population in the Faiyum must have been largely Christian by the year 300, as there was already about this time a translation of the New Testament in the Faiyumic dialect. It would therefore be as well not to date our stele later than the fifth century. This carving from Arsinoe in the Faiyum, older and richer in tradition as it was, still showed in the fifth century more of the antique feeling for the human form when compared with what Antinoe produced, even though it appeared provincial beside the sculpture of Constantinople of the same period.

Perhaps older, probably not yet Christian, is another funerary stele from the Faiyum, today in Cairo. It shows a woman sitting under an arch shaped like a shell, holding a child on her left arm, and raising her right hand in greeting. She wears a veil over her hair, a long robe with sleeves, and shoes. The child is also clothed in a kind of shirt. Here the problem of the seated figure is mastered to a certain extent, though not entirely satis-

*Plate 78*



factorily, but already the pose of the child is that of a stiff doll. The sparse folds of the robe are incised schematically and ornamentally, without regard to their natural flow. The figure has more depth than that of the Leningrad stele, but it is less ably represented. We recognize here a provincial folk art similar to that in the stelae from Sheikh Abada. Yet we cannot doubt that this stele was also erected for a Greek mother.

Plate 4

Now let us reconsider the stele of Rhodia from Kom Buljeh in the Faiyum, which we have already put in our imaginary museum beside that of the praying woman. Very different from the rather carelessly executed stele of the seated mother in Cairo, the architectural framework of this piece in Berlin is represented clearly and cleanly, but the praying figure is utterly remote from the antique feeling for the body and its artistic principles. Only the pose is retained and also, roughly, the clothing with the cloak drawn over the head. The manner in which this is represented, however, has nothing in common with late Greek provincial art in Egypt. The body, with the upper arms, forms a block on which the folds are engraved graphically, more or less parallel, so that they appear like bands. The girdle encircles the body like a hoop round a barrel. Just above it two little rounds appear in the folds which are apparently meant to represent the breasts. The upper arms are very short and disappear into the indistinct garment, the fore-arms are no less short, proportioned like those of a new-born baby, and the hands, which are broken away, judging by what is left of them were equally tiny in comparison with the massive body. The feet and ankles hang from under the robe like thin sticks. The head, surrounded by the frame-like cloak, appears like a primitive mask on a pole. The stonemason who produced this figure very probably wanted to represent it in the same way as the provincial artist who created the woman on the Leningrad stele. But he did not use the same methods as his Greek colleague, he probably was not even aware of them. He knew nothing of the balance of the figure, nothing of naturalistic proportioning and nothing of the antique method of rendering the flowing folds of garments. It does not present a likeness of a human being, even in the way that the Greek stelae from the Faiyum do, schematic and unsure of themselves as these may be, but a prehistoric idol born of a feeling for form absolutely untouched by that of Greece or Rome. The Greek stelae from the Faiyum are late, weak and provincial marginal products of the antique culture; in contrast the stele of Rhodia is a work of genuine early archaism. When we assembled our imaginary museum we called this stele medieval. It could also be called primitive, because what connects it with the artistic attempts of early Irish or Frankish sculpture, and makes the art expert put them on the same level, is the fact that it is obviously the work of a craftsman who stands in complete opposition to the antique. Nevertheless, because he is commissioned to do so, or because it is the custom, he will or must take over a motif and is stimulated by it solely in an iconographical sense, that is, as far as the theme of the picture is concerned, but he does not make the slightest attempt to employ the form. It is so foreign to him that he represents the theme in a new, archaic, individual way, for which we know no prototype, and for which there was very probably none in



this craftsman's environment. In spite of the Greek name of the deceased we must assume that it referred to a Coptic lady from the Faiyum, who had entrusted the setting-up of her funerary stele to a Copt. This memorial was intended to be like those made for the ruling classes of the Oasis. Rhodia wished to appear as a worshipper before her God in death exactly as did the Greek Christians of her homeland. The craftsman who made her stele was successful in this. But though he represented her in such a way that one can still see today that this woman is a Christian like the Greeks on the Faiyum stelae, she is nevertheless a Copt, a member of that class of society in the Oasis which was converted to the new religion very early because it was excluded from the culture of the ruling class, and whose masters had also either Hellenized or destroyed its old beliefs. In the gable above the architrave with the name of the deceased on it is the ancient Egyptian



V Isis cult figure,  
with dove and grapes.  
Funerary stele  
from Sheikh Abada



sign of life, the *ankh*, one of the few reminders of the lost ancient Egyptian culture in Coptic times, made Christian and given a new interpretation by the addition of the two letters A and Ω, that apocalyptic sign for Christ (*Rev.* 1, 8 and elsewhere). Perhaps we may also see in this adoption of the *ankh* a symbol of the Coptic world of Rhodia.

Subsequent to the Egyptian-style stelae from Kom Abu Billu, which clearly showed the existence of ancient Egyptian artistic traditions in the late third and the first half of the fourth century, we now encounter for the first time among the stelae a Coptic work which is not connected with any tradition. In the stele of Rhodia we see the appearance of an independent Coptic art, which is searching for a new way to master the problem of representing human beings. This stele is not a late work standing at the end of a long previous development; it is free from any past connections. H. Zaloscer, when calling Coptic art a folk art in which one can perceive the 'true expression of the Egyptian people', remarked at the same time that perhaps we possess in it a small substitute for the Egyptian folk art which was lost from Pharaonic, Persian and Ptolemaic times. Faced with the Rhodia stele doubts arise about this theory, so tempting in itself. We know nothing of a folk art from ancient Egyptian times. And such works from Ptolemaic and early Roman times as might suggest folk art were scarcely created by the fellahin; they belong to antique art, even though often defective and faulty. Consequently, it may be doubted whether apart from the embellishment of objects of daily use, a folk art created by the Egyptian peasants and craftsmen existed before the Copts, converted to Christianity, self-consciously and valiantly fighting to show their faith and rejecting everything Greek, found their own style as we see it on the Rhodia stele. This art, not the provincial art of the declining Greek world, had a great future; it was to have an influence far beyond the frontiers of Egypt.

Even if we can never close the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between the degenerating Greek provincial art and the developing Coptic-Christian art, the Faiyum at least offers us many works which bring us nearer doing so. We have already contrasted the charming  
 Plate 6 picture of *Maria lactans* from Medinet el-Faiyum with the sacerdotal stone slab in Cairo. The relief has a curious two-layered appearance which reminds one of early medieval work from the western world. The figures appear to have been cut out and fastened to the background, and at the same time they give the appearance of a drawing rather than of sculpture. The stonemason has kept as strictly to the antique manner of figure representation for his sacred theme as the creator of the Rhodia stele, without thereby detracting from their idol-like appearance. We have already seen how different was the spirit that lay behind this portrayal of the Madonna from that which inspired the slab from Medinet el-Faiyum. This medieval spirit is rooted in the Coptic world, not in that  
 Plate 34 of the Greek Faiyum. Contrasting with it is the Madonna tablet, now in Cairo, of which the exact provenance is not known, but which, judging from the general style, was carved by a Faiyumic sculptor. It is after a Byzantine motif, and is in the style of late antique royal portraits, given a heavenly interpretation with its angelic bodyguards, and suggests



an austere devotional picture. Nevertheless, it is essentially different from the idol-like portrait of *Maria lactans*. It is not only in the figures, which are to a certain extent successful in their proportioning and foreshortening, that the difference lies, but above all the slight but noticeable turning of the two angels towards the Queen of Heaven. The worshippers at the side of *Maria lactans* stand facing to the front just as rigidly as the Madonna who is enthroned between them. In contrast, the two angels beside the Nikopoia turn towards her, thus creating a relationship between them and the central figure. This is underlined by the gesture of both the divine bodyguards, each of whom lays one hand gently on the arms of the Mother of God, touching her only with their finger-tips. Not only do the two reliefs differ basically in composition, but also in style. This is not solely due to the fact that one is a two-level relief, and the other is plastically moulded, but also to the form of the details. For example, the faces in the Nikopoia are not exactly expressive or beautiful, but human and naturalistically correct; in the *Maria lactans* they are abstract masks formed with a few strokes, and do not look like human faces. The *Maria lactans* comes from a basically different world, the world of fanatical Coptic Christendom, which did not shrink from terror and death to defend its faith. Coptic works of this type indicate that the earthly beauty that characterized the magnificent and heroic world of the classical Greeks, though still living on, pallid and stylized, in the doubtful Hellenism of late antique Egypt, was for the Copts not in the least divine or worthy of cultivation, in fact a temptation of the devil. The prophet having foretold of Christ 'He hath no form nor comeliness' (*Isaiah*, 53, 2), the Copts represented the divine figures and themselves correspondingly. Here too is 'no beauty that we should desire Him', because in the eyes of the monks, the leaders of Coptic Christendom, who were enemies of the world, the earthly body with its transient beauty was something that must be combatted and cast off if one were to find favour with God. How could God Himself or the Mother of God then be represented in earthly beauty? Particularly, seeing that the ideal of beauty of the time was that of the hated Greeks? This art is hard, frightening and deliberately unbeautiful, like the Coptic monks themselves.

We left the subject of the funerary stelae in order to point out the difference between Greek and Coptic folk art in late antique Egypt, taking examples from a narrow, restricted area — probably also from a not less narrow and limited period of time. We can, however, assess the position we have now reached more accurately if we consider examples of funerary stelae from the rest of Egypt. From Giza, opposite the Roman fortress of Babylon, the predecessor of Cairo, lying on the edge of the western desert, originates a small funerary stele, badly damaged, which is now in the Berlin Museum. The part which depicts a woman praying between two pillars is perfectly preserved, though the top is broken away. The worshipper stands facing rigidly to the front in a rather narrow space. The robe looks like the drawing of a tower with a rounded top which completely obscures the body. At the sides two thin forearms, ending in tiny hands, emerge quite unnaturally from the robe. The feet hang down from beneath the hem so that the

Plate 79



woman seems to be suspended rather than standing. The very large head rests on a short neck and is encircled by two rows of rectangles representing the coiffure. The face has no eyes, though it shows a plastically modelled mouth, the corners of which are very accentuated, and a nose which, taken in conjunction with the forehead, has the appearance of a superimposed lotus flower. The two pillars have, with the oblong frame of their shafts, a decoration of branches in relief, which is probably meant to represent a vine, though without grapes. The very roughly worked flat capitals are reminiscent

Plate 31 of those from Der Mawas, now in Recklinghausen. Here, too, we encounter a relief on two planes similar to the *Maria lactans* from the Faiyum, which shows real modelling only in the face, while the sparse folds of the robe and the vertical bands on the little cloak are merely incised. The peculiar way in which the hair is represented was also

Plate 15 a feature of the Berlin relief of the mounted Christ from Der Amba Schenoute. The stele from Giza, therefore, is a purely Coptic work in which the choice of motif, like the technique, has been influenced by the nearby Faiyum, but which looks quite different from the Rhodia stele. We can see from it that the developing Coptic art had not yet found a unified style, and as a true, down-to-earth folk art, it was probably unable to find one. Each Coptic stonemason saw himself faced anew with the same problem, to be true to the artist in himself, and each one solved it in his own way. Yet there is something characteristic of Coptic art even about this nameless stele from Giza: the tendency towards two-level relief and towards the type of ornamentation which appears as if cut out. We shall meet them both again.

Interesting and characteristic of the artistic position in the Nile Valley are the stelae from Luxor and Karnak, the ancient Thebes. To all appearances there are no unified or  
Plate 80 general types. For example, a stele in Cairo, which comes from one of these two places — we do not know for certain which — takes over the Greek style from the Faiyum. It could almost be assumed that an artist from the Faiyum had worked this stele, so closely do the styles resemble each other. Only in the iconography are there differences: behind the figure of the female worshipper a lattice is stretched between two columns, and the woman, who wears an embroidered *stola*, appears to have a halo, unless this is meant for a veil (details of this kind, in view of the low artistic quality of such stelae, often cannot be clearly identified). In view of late antique ways of representing perspective, it is possible that the lattice is in fact a carpet, but that also cannot be stated

Plate 81 with any certainty. Quite different from it is a stele from Luxor, now in Berlin: two squat pilasters on high block bases support a simple architrave over which is an arch enclosing a couch: the relief is finished off at the upper angles by two slender trefoils which grow out of the arch. Just as in the case of the stele from Giza the pilasters take the form of narrow frames containing the ornamentation, in this case, of hearts placed one above the other; the same pattern appears on the arch. In the niche between the pilasters stands the bust of a young man. This is somewhat puzzling, because in the art  
102 of the late antique on the Nile there is hardly anything similar. In form the rest of the



stele has much in common with those from Upper Egypt; but the bust, which appears to stand on a short pillar and is thus reminiscent of a herm, is not within Egyptian or Greek tradition as a memorial for the dead. Rather it suggests the masks and busts of the deceased which the Romans used to display in their houses. Does it mean that in this instance a Roman had had his funerary stele decorated in the Coptic way, but provided it with his own characteristically Roman bust? Or has a Copt, knowing Rome and its customs, attempted to adapt them? The peculiar contradiction in the style of the stele which is shown in the two-level appearance of the frame and its decoration on the one hand, and the really modelled bust on the other, does not help to solve the mystery. The name of the deceased is not given, and we do not know from what kind of background the stele comes, because we know only roughly the place where it was found. In all other respects, however, it is a very characteristic example of how the styles mingled in the ancient town of Thebes, and how influences came together here from all districts of Egypt. They still could not produce a unified image.

We shall now consider a third stele from this region, to be found in the Coptic Museum. *Plate 83*  
 It is rounded at the top and in this way resembles Upper Egyptian stelae, as we know them, from Esna. The architectural framework, too, has taken its inspiration from here. *Plate 84*  
 Two sturdy pillars, which have a herring-bone decoration, stand on square bases, which are not architecturally correct and take the form of framed squares with four smaller squares inside, forming a cross. The capitals, above a solid slab, each consist of two thick leaves, curved so sharply as to resemble hooks. Above this there is a pointed gable, without an architrave, decorated with indistinct rows of flowers. The segmented spaces between the gable and the top of the stele are filled with two very poorly represented peacocks, the antique bird of immortality. In the middle, under the gable, a huntsman rides on a badly executed horse, trampling a gazelle underfoot, whilst a second gazelle appears to stand on the horse's crupper. The rider is of a touching, child-like primitiveness. All the detail in the upper part of the body is simply incised, not modelled. The face is merely a circle in which a few strokes have been scratched, like the face of the man in the moon drawn by a child. It is impossible to see what the huntsman is wearing, except for his giant pointed headdress. Is this a helmet or a Phrygian cap? And is it a veil, worn as a protection against the heat like the modern Bedouin, or hair, that shows beneath the headdress? We can see traces of the Egyptian tradition in the discrepancy in the visual relationship of the legs to the upper part of the body and the head, and the two-level nature of the relief is connected with what we have already recognized as Coptic in the Faiyum. This motif, the mounted huntsman with gazelles, was typical of the ancient Orient, and later became popular again through the influence of Sassanian art. A connection with Persia can also be seen in the weapon of the huntsman, which appears to be a bow. The Phrygian cap, too, if that is what it is, comes from the east. The type of stele and the architectural frame show Upper Egyptian influence, and the peacocks are a very old motif. This stele then is a classic piece of evidence for the oft-repeated theory — most



recently postulated by M. Cramer — that in the narrower sense of the word, Coptic art is a hybrid art. Lacking its own ancient and still living tradition it took what it could use from wherever it could find it. In the Roman Empire, which had taken over so many ancient cultures, it was very possible, in view of the late Roman military policy of enlisting men wherever they found them, that Copts in remote Thebes could come under the influence of distant provinces. It was never the great art, the so-called imperial art that they looked to, because it was, in the eyes of the Copts, Greek, being represented in the eastern empire by Greeks or Hellenized Asians, and therefore to be avoided. Coptic art borrowed here and there from the local surroundings in which it developed. This it forged into something new, which is unmistakable because it is presented in the simple and archaic terms of a newly developing folk art. Like all genuine folk art it had the technique (two-level relief), also the individual forms (human portraits, animal representations, decoration) that led back to quite simple formulas. It reduces nature and its models to abstract patterns. It is child-like and sophisticated at the same time. It is only necessary to compare the face of the rider in this stele with the completely filled background; it shows the *horror vacui* in reliefs which is so characteristic of almost every folk art known to us. If we compare the harmonious effect produced, in the case of the Faiyum stele, by the figure set against an empty background, with the appearance of the stele from the region of ancient Thebes we have just been considering, where every attempt is made to cover the background without any regard to composition, the extent of the difference between the offshoot of late antique Greek art and budding Coptic folk art will immediately become apparent. The stele of Rhodia, recognized as Coptic, wholly follows the Greek prototypes in this respect.

Further south, in Upper Egypt, the human figure is not represented on tombstones. That is not to say that it is not occasionally taken over from other centres, but the characteristic stelae from the larger places are without figures. Not far south of Luxor is  
 Plate 82 Armant, the ancient Hermonthis, and the type of stele associated with it looks completely different from those we have been considering.

To begin with, the shape is different, often taking the form of a regular trapeze. The design in the upper third takes the form of a pointed gable in which is the monogram of Christ, the so-called *chi-rho* while in the corners above are the signs A and Ω. A border under the gable, which serves as an architrave, shows the name of the deceased, Eucharis, followed by a sign of unknown meaning and two crosses. The architrave, with the gable upon it, appears to hang in space without the support of column or pilaster. The middle third of the stele is decorated with two *ankhs*, with between them a shape which projects down into the lower part of the stele; this, according to M. Cramer, is either an ancient Egyptian hieroglyph, *Sma* the sign for the lungs and windpipe, or simply a spade. Under this, the bottom part of the stele is empty except for two stems, from each of which a leaf projects into the outer corners of the *ankh*. This ornamentation is extremely plain, but the way in which the middle and most important section is decorated with emblems





76 Boy with a cross. Painted limestone funerary stele from Sheikh Abada



77 Youth with grapes and a wreath. Painted limestone funerary stele from Sheikh Abada







fitting closely together shows a very refined and attractive simplicity, which no longer has a *horror vacui* and in which the background is decorated with restraint.

This marked simplicity is not found elsewhere. At Esna, the ancient Latopolis, rich ornamentation runs riot. The stele of a Christian named Martha, now in Cairo, serves as an example. Above the empty lower surface, which shows the formula of belief in 'One God' and the name of the deceased on its upper edge, stand four very squat pillars, similar to those on the stele with the man's bust from Luxor which support semicircular arches decorated with a row of discs. Under these arcades, two birds are represented in front view with outstretched wings, and looking towards the centre. Every tiny empty space of the background is filled with foliate decoration. A third similar, but larger arcade stands upon the two lower ones. The arch bears a pattern of semicircles with discs in the upper spaces and small trefoils in the lower ones. The upper half of the arcade is decorated with a conch with a cross on it, below which two identical birds are represented with their beaks touching. Finally, the whole thing is enclosed within a round arch extending down the sides and forming a band filled with frolicking animals — three symmetrical pairs, and at the summit a bird with widespread wings. Here, too, botanical decoration has been included. Upon the whole stele there is literally not an iota of empty space, everything is densely covered. At the same time the relief has a very hard outline, and does not give the appearance of stone-carving so much as wood-carving. The excessive decoration makes a restless and overcrowded impression and confuses the eye. An overflowing joy in decorative forms runs wild on this type of stele, not only on the example chosen. Whether everything we see here has a symbolic meaning is not certain. The birds in the lower arcades and the one at the top of the enclosing arch have a circle engraved on their breasts, which doubtless is intended to represent the *bulla*, the round amulet that we find so often in the funerary art of late antique Egypt. At the same time these birds, whose exact species we cannot determine, are symbols of soul-birds. The two birds with beaks touching we might conceivably associate with the idea of paradise. But whether modern archaeologists in their anxiety for an interpretation have seen more in this than was intended is an open question. The two animals at the base of the large arch are antique-style sea-horses. On Roman sarcophagi of the third century representations of the ocean, upon which the souls were transported on their journey to the Isles of the Blest, were popular. In the late antique, therefore, these belong to the sphere of funerary art, and perhaps they are still being used here intentionally. Perhaps the two pairs of gazelles too are a substitute for the harts which in the Psalms are symbols of the soul thirsting after God (Ps. 42, 2). But all this is hypothetical. The only certain symbols are the cross and the words 'One God', which constitute, moreover, a favourite Monophysite formula. The uncertainty about the meaning of the individual elements in the decoration of this stele is characteristic. We are constantly being surprised by it when faced with

Plate 84

- 78 Woman and child. Limestone funerary stele from the Faiyum
- 79 Praying woman. Limestone funerary stele from Giza
- 80 Praying woman. Limestone funerary stele from Karnak or Luxor
- 81 Bust of a man. Limestone funerary stele from Luxor



typical products of folk art. But even though we may fail to wrest from the symbols their ultimate meaning, we are able to recognize in this stele — which does not depict the person to whose memory it was set up — the essence of Coptic art delighting in decoration and not averse to a certain humour, even at the burial place, and which has made full use of both Egyptian and Hellenistic traditions of funerary art. Such a stele gives the impression of a purely ornamental composition; one could easily imagine it adapted to another medium, either carved out of wood or embroidered upon linen. It even inclines one to think that it was modelled on a textile. This will hardly have been the case, but the fact that such a conjecture enters our mind at all underlines the interchangeable character of such purely ornamental compositions, which are no longer either developed from the material or bound to a particular kind.

Similar, but again seeking a style of its own, is the type of stele from Edfu, formerly called Apollinopolis Magna, about halfway between Thebes (Luxor) and Syene (Aswan).

Plate 85 A stele now in the British Museum probably originates from there. We cannot be quite certain whether such stelae are not perhaps grave slabs, that is to say, stones which covered the graves and not stelae which were set upright. Besides being less sturdy than the average stele, they are without the undecorated lower section which was either inserted in the ground or which served as a base when the stele was set up in a funerary chapel. The London specimen is not entirely intact, a corner has clearly been chipped off the top edge. The rectangular relief is enclosed in a double frame, the outer one decorated with a twofold, very simply interwoven design, the inner one with a flat ivy stem winding in regular curves. The lower part of the inner area — which now composes two thirds of the whole — shows a bird with outspread wings. It flies towards the left and looks back towards the right. A large *bull*a hangs round its neck, and it holds a cross in its beak. The area below it is occupied by a coarsely rendered leafy branch, that above it by a medallion with a cross enclosed in the decoratively elongated pinions of the wings; a close pattern of discs fills the medallion rim. Above, there is a Greek inscription giving the name of the deceased, Sophronios. Over that there is a little temple, unfortunately not quite intact, which encloses a monogram cross. Here, as in the upper corners of the lower part of the design, discs are set against the background. The *horror vacui* does not appear quite so pronounced as in the stelae from Esna, but it has apparently influenced the introduction of these discs and the branch at the bottom. Technique and style resemble those of the Esna stele, only certain details are more finely worked and the two-level effect of the relief is not so consistently carried through. However strange such stelae may seem with their over-abundant decoration, they have their own individual and primitive charm. They are perhaps the finest examples of Coptic folk art that have come down to us from the late antique. For the most part these Upper Egyptian stelae are dated to the sixth or seventh century. This dating, however, is based upon those principles, already described and challenged, according to which the age of objects is made to depend on how much they differ in style from the antique. It is precisely these



- 83 Mounted huntsman with gazelles.  
Limestone funerary stele from Luxor

Below right:

- 84 Birds and cross under arcades.  
Limestone funerary stele from Esna

- 82 Limestone funerary stele from Armant







85 Tempietto with cross  
and symbolic bird.  
Limestone funerary  
stele from Edfu (?)



stelae, not only those from Edfu, but also those from Karnak, Luxor, Armant and Esna, which, by their characteristics, strikingly refute this method of dating, based as it is upon a false theory of decadence. This folk art has nothing whatsoever to do with the antique. It did not become estranged from the antique gradually, but it is by its very nature deeply and basically foreign to it. To measure it against the antique and to date it according to its distance from the antique would be like measuring Maya art by Spanish late Gothic standards, and dating it according to how it differs from this. Today we have still no standard by which we can date folk art. The stele of Edfu, described in catalogues as a seventh-century piece, could equally well belong to the fifth century. This is equally true of the other stelae. They cannot show us how the late antique gradually changed over to the style of the Middle Ages through slowly discarding its classical heritage and through influences from the orient or elsewhere. Rather they go to prove that, beside the feeble off-shoots of the antique, there blossomed, in the provincial art of late antique Egypt created by and for Greeks, an independent, individual folk art of the Copts, which followed quite different principles. Here we are looking at another world. It could not well be otherwise in view of the deliberate and consistent exclusion of the Egyptian people from antique culture. While in the Faiyum an attempt was made to annex themes from the provincial Greek, this was not done in Upper Egypt. What was created here stands alone beside Mediterranean imperial art, its provincial deviations and degenerations. The art of Upper Egypt is purely Coptic.

We have not mentioned types of stelae from all the different regions. Still more examples could be given. But in order to illustrate the contrast between provincial Greek late-antique work and the developing Coptic art, we have looked at those examples which are the most characteristic. However, one stele only should be added, not for artistic reasons, but on historical grounds and because of its moving simplicity. The funerary stele of Apa Schenoute reached the Berlin Museum from Sohag. In all probability we have in this modest little slab, which is only 53 cms high, the gravestone of the famous abbot and reformer of Coptic monasticism, who died in the year 466 having been the leader of his monastery since 385. He was the most notable writer among Coptic Christians, an able administrator, a great preacher and honoured as a saintly man; he took part in the Council of Ephesus in the year 431 in the company of the Patriarch Cyril of Alexandria. The nun, Theodote, had dedicated the silver cross, now in Berlin, to his memory. He was one of the greatest of the Coptic Christians, but his gravestone tells us nothing of this. Beneath a simple rounded arch stands an old man in a cowl, his staff in his hand. The relief is primitive. A little of the ancient Egyptian tradition can still be seen in the position of the feet, which are represented in profile, while the body is turned completely to the front. The incised folds of the garment divide it into fairly parallel broad bands, without any regard to the natural flow of a heavy piece of material. The proportions are just as bad as those of the Rhodia stele and the one from Giza. Only in this case the head is small in relation to the body, and we can discern but little of this old man's

*Plate 86*

*Plate 16*



face. A bald pate with little tufts of hair at the sides and a long beard, that much can be seen. The lines of the face were only incised in a very coarse and primitive manner, and today they have mostly disappeared through the crumbling of the surface. The stele gives us no inkling of this man's importance. The inscription merely gives the name, Apa Schenoute, and no more. Not a word about his life's work for monasticism, of his significance as a preacher and a Church leader. A Copt, undoubtedly a monk belonging to Schenoute's monastery, carved this memorial, child-like in its simplicity, purely as a work of art without giving it any meaning. It is not even so definitely Coptic or anti-antique as the Rhodia stele or the stele of the unknown woman from Giza, and yet it is highly characteristic of the nature of Coptic art and is evidence of Coptic history, which is, at the same time, the history of Coptic Christendom. In this funerary stele, made for one of the most significant figures of Coptic monasticism, the first hesitant steps towards an individual artistic expression have been taken; and this applies no less to the memorials to many fellow-believers among his people. No Greek was at work here, the Coptic monks themselves created the decoration of the grave of their great father. It expresses the uncompromising attitude adopted by monasticism towards the ancient world as well as the implacable rejection of Greek customs and culture which, in the eyes of the Coptic monks, were unmasked as the enemies of the 'true teaching' in Chalcedon in 451.

## PROVINCIAL GREEK SCULPTURE

The funerary stelae have made it possible for us to differentiate clearly between provincial Greek and Coptic art. What is suggested by the history of Egypt at the time of the Roman Empire has been confirmed by this group of monuments. The two main components of the late antique heritage of Egypt differ essentially in character. Neither belongs to the sphere of mature art, 'official art'. Both are folk art, but in different senses. What has reached us from the Greek towns and districts is a watered-down version of great art, lacking its distinctive style and, though derived from it, slowly but surely degenerating as it loosened its ties with the stylistic development of the art of the empire. This the stelae have already shown us, and the remaining sculpture will confirm the verdict. What the Copts for their part were attempting was to make a new beginning and to take groping steps forward into new territory. They set the vigour of new ideas against the lassitude of old age. Whilst the art of the Greeks of Egypt had become separated from the development of the art of the empire, Coptic art had never belonged to it. It went its own way, which enabled it to continue into the medieval period and modern times, while Greek provincial art in the Nile valley was submerged when Egypt was conquered by Islam, and the medieval period began.

Unfortunately we know little of late classical Alexandria. Because of the unbroken history of this town from its foundation until the present day, almost everything from



the restless centuries of this period has disappeared. We know of the churches of the patriarch's city only from literary sources. The only Christian catacomb discovered there has been lost, and we know its paintings only from scanty copies. There remains nothing that we can safely describe as Alexandrian. A not inconsiderable number of ivory and bone carvings, scattered among the great collections of the world, prove the continued existence of Hellenistic motifs and forms in the city, but there is nothing to connect them with what, since Strzygowski's time, has been termed 'Coptic' by scholars, and which we feel obliged to divide into provincial Greek and Coptic art. Some excellent examples of woollen weaving may also come from there; they are based on Hellenistic paintings and their date is disputed. Not until the sixth century can we discern a tendency, at least in the ivory carvings, towards emancipation from the early Byzantine influences, resulting in works of original character. These are in the first place the reliefs on the pulpit of the Emperor Henry II in Aachen Cathedral, the Isis which we have already compared with portraits of the Madonna, and the ivory depicting Apollo and Daphne in the Museo Nazionale in Ravenna. But before we turn to these we must consider a thoroughly Hellenistic, perhaps classical, example of Alexandrian carving, in order to gauge the difference between them. A characteristic example for comparison would be the little ivory box in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, which was probably used for keeping medicines in. A town-goddess (*Tyche*) is represented on the lid. She is a somewhat voluptuous woman, wearing a very thin under-garment (*peplos*), girdled high under the bosom, and an elegantly draped mantle. In her left hand she holds a cornucopia, and in her extended right, the rudder of a boat. Her hair is dressed in the Egyptian style, in a similar way to that of the Greek lady whose likeness was the first to be placed in our imaginary museum. She wears a diadem decorated with feathers, reminiscent of ancient Egyptian designs. A little Eros flies in the upper left-hand corner, holding back a curtain behind the figure of the Tyche with his left hand, while in his right he holds an open folding mirror. The Egyptian style of headdress and the rudder as attributes of the Tyche tell us that this is the town-goddess of Alexandria. The little carving is still entirely in the spirit of the classical period. The woman's attitude, her proportions, the representation of the garments, particularly the transparent underdress, the pose and the face of the Eros, the whole stylistic effect, as well as the purely Hellenistic theme, tell of a living tradition of high artistic merit. Only the somewhat disproportionately large head, some slight inaccuracies in depicting the left arm, the inadequate carving of some of the folds which introduces a lineal effect into the relief, and the occasional supplementing of the modelling against the background by incised lines, betray that this is a late antique work. It may very well be dated to the time of artistic revival at the turn of the fourth century, which influenced the Roman Empire until far into the fifth century. It went hand in hand, moreover, with a return to classical Roman influences in poetry, and, interestingly enough, this movement was led in Rome by the poet Claudian, who came from Egypt. In this excellent little carving we find at

Plate 41

Plate 88



one and the same time a deep-rooted tradition from one of the world centres of Hellenistic culture, and an artistic fashion characteristic of the period. The result is a little masterpiece in the classical spirit. Its sculptor was one of the last who was able to understand how to create a human image in the tradition of a culture which was deeply rooted in Greek mythology.

Plate 42 This understanding of and firm relationship with a living tradition appears to end in the sixth century, as a little ivory plaque in the Museo Nazionale in Ravenna shows. Here we see how the nymph Daphne, pursued by Apollo, turns herself into a laurel tree. This myth of the daughter of a river-god, whom the oracle could not preserve in any other way from the great god's passion, was very popular in classical times. It told a tale of primitive savagery and ruthless love as well as self-sacrificing chastity. In what is probably an older form of the myth, the nymph fled back into the womb of her mother, Gaia (that is, the earth swallowed her), who then caused a laurel tree to grow in her place. The only version known in late Roman times, apparently, was that contained in the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid, and this was the only one to be depicted at that time in Egypt. It is the theme of our ivory plaque. But the artist has made a pretty idyll out of the myth: while the nymph is turning into a laurel tree, she waves coquettishly to the pursuing god; he plucks the strings of his lyre, to sing a serenade to his beloved. A swan, the bird of the goddess of love, Aphrodite, hovers in the laurel tree, and a little Eros flutters above the god, greeting the pair with his raised hand. It would hardly be possible to prettify this myth more, or to rob it further of its religious meaning. Yet there is still a thoroughly antique feeling for form in the style of this relief for all its insipidness. The artistic tradition is not yet at an end, in spite of such failures as the badly modelled Eros, whereas the once so confident unity of the world of Greek mythology which had been cultivated in Alexandria, at least in a scholarly sense, has gone. Harsh religious severity has been turned into a pastoral anecdote, Hellenic nature-worship has become a slightly disreputable love story; judging by her peevish grimace and her friendly gesture, this Daphne regrets her chastity; and this Apollo shows no passion, but conducts his wooing to music even when his love of the moment is actually being transformed into a tree. The god of purification and atonement, of healing, and the oracle whose arrows brought sickness and death, the leader of the Muses and of souls, has become a languishing fellow — truly an astonishing rendering! This is the city atmosphere; true, there may perhaps be in it something of the sophistry of the Alexandrian critics of the myths, but at the same time it shows a complete severance from Greek mythology. This paganism is no longer alive as a faith, not even in the late antique allegorical sense. The pagan theme now only serves as a decoration and an improper suggestion. It could almost be taken for a deliberate warning to ladies to avoid the nymph's fate.

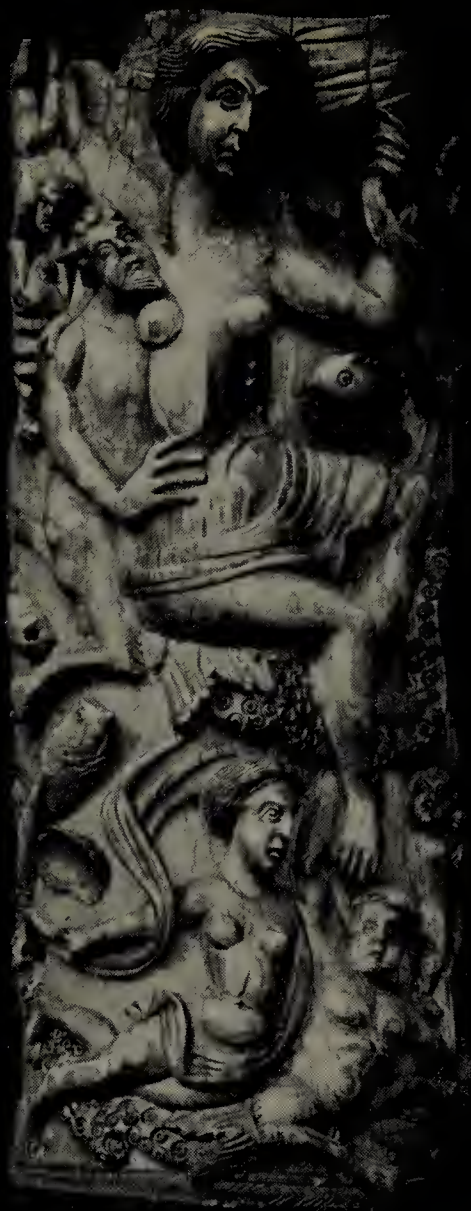
114 In the later sixth century, the artistic tradition also came to an end, though others hold that this did not happen until the Umayyad period. It made room for a barbarization that is both astonishing and horrifying. It is probably an unavoidable result of the



86 Apa Schenoute.  
Limestone  
funerary stele  
from Sohag







87 Nereids, Pan and Triton,  
erotes and sea animals.  
Ivory relief from the pulpit of Henry II

88 Town-goddess (Tyche of Alexandria?).  
Ivory casket lid

89 Bacchus. Detail of an ivory relief  
on the pulpit of Henry II



loosing of the religious bonds of the ancient Greek world, and its subsequent isolation in a surrounding world that was mostly foreign or Christian. The art inspired by the myths was deprived of its foundation, the mythology itself, and the form could not stand on its own. And the ascendant Christian Coptic art appears to have had some effect. In the Alexandrian ivory carvings, too, we cannot fail to detect the end of the antique and the dawn of the Middle Ages with their quite different, new, non-antique spirit. The absolutely classic examples of this are the six ivory reliefs let into the pulpit of the Emperor Henry II in Aachen Cathedral. They were probably left over after the decoration (the dimensions show that the six reliefs divide into two slightly different groups). Once again we see figures from ancient mythology. But how they have altered! This is particularly noticeable in representations of nereids and their companions on one of the reliefs. These far from beautiful ladies, out of proportion and awkward, sport with their lovers, surrounded by fish and other sea creatures; a very ancient and popular theme in the seaport of Alexandria. The wooer of the upper nereid, much smaller than she, who lays his huge hand on her hip and peers out from under her arm, is a faun, who hardly seems at home in the ocean. His beloved sits on the tail of a fish, which lies there in a somewhat irrelevant manner, having apparently lost its Triton's body somewhere, on account of which the faun makes good use of his opportunity. The lady below, her body artistically posed, flirts with a Triton, who, apparently not finding this enough, grasps the right ankle of the upper nereid at the same time. Two little naked boys are also represented. One of them dives down at a huge shell; in doing so his figure obscures the raised forearm of the upper nereid. The second, who has already seized his shell, rides on the raised left hand of the lower Triton. Here it is quite clear that the man who carved the work has merely taken the myth as a cover for an erotic subject. He is not interested in the allegorical meaning that the daughters of the sea-god Nereus had for the port of Alexandria; they merely provide him with the figures for a love-scene. The inherent attitude towards ancient mythology recalls that of European rococo, except that the execution is far less skilful. The figures are badly out of proportion: one has only to observe the gigantic hand of the little faun, and the short legs of the lower nereid, the bust of the upper nereid and her over-long body. The problem of foreshortening in the representation of a seated figure has not been solved, and the faces are sullen and ugly, and look more suited to a tragic scene than to a love-story. Many of the details are meaningless, as for example the cloak rolled into a spiral shape swinging on the left arm of the upper nereid, and the fish-tail on which she sits. Thus it is not only the sense which is far removed from the antique, the style, too, is as foreign to it as can be. The great Hellenistic tradition of Alexandria is dead.

*Plate 87*

It has been assumed that these ivory carvings are Coptic in contrast to the Hellenistic survivals from Alexandrian carving (Strzygowski). This is more than unlikely. In the sixth century, if we take the earliest date, the Coptic world was entirely Christian, and had been so for some time. It was fanatically anti-Greek, and never had or wished to



have anything to do with Greek mythology, an attitude strengthened by its Christian fanaticism, at this time already strictly Monophysite. The Copts saw the gods, demi-gods and mythical beings of the classical world as evil, seductive and dangerous; they were demons driving men to destruction. Having regard to the history of late-antique Egypt, it is impossible to imagine that the reliefs in Aachen were carved by Copts. They can only have been Greeks from Alexandria; it can scarcely be assumed that they were still pagans. For them also the old gods were dead, though they still had a decorative function. It is not just chance that caused the Byzantine Greeks to use figures from ancient mythology as a matter of course in Christian works, well into medieval times. The myths belonged to the Greeks' own past, so they could be much more unconstrained about them than the Copts. Strzygowski's attribution was based on their truly poor artistic style, and the loss of aesthetic sense, which is so painfully obvious. We are forced to conclude that this decline of classical art in the fourth and fifth centuries was due not to the influence of a foreign people but to a loss of artistic feeling in the Alexandrian Greek world. Although we refuse to admit a general theory of decadence, we must recognize a true decadence here.

Plate 41 The other figures of gods from the Aachen reliefs do not make this so unmistakably clear. Take the Isis, for example. She is obviously Isis Pharos of the harbour of Alexandria, as in her right hand she holds a ship with its crew, who are just raising the sail. We have already seen how the mingling of religions and cults in late antiquity heaped companions and attributes upon Isis which have nothing to do with her particular sphere. The greyhound, on the other hand, who raises his muzzle between Pan and the goddess, probably stands for the Dog Star Sirius, the star of Isis. On the cornucopia there is a little temple, in which is sitting Horus, the son of the goddess and Osiris, called Harpocrates by the Greeks. Isis wears the ancient Greek *peplos*, girdled with a decoratively knotted cord, and a mantle flung loosely about her. Her pose is majestic, but a little stiff in spite of the position of her legs, one of which is bent. She had already acquired in early times the attributes, nature, and functions of other goddesses, for example Aphrodite, and now she has gained those of the gods as well: not only does she have the god Pan in her train, but she has taken his maenads away from Bacchus and acquired the symbol of Serapis. Thus she is presented as the great goddess, who unites in herself the functions of the whole assembly of the gods. She is a last symbol of late antique heathen monotheism at a time when the Christian God had already cast down the gods of the Greeks and Egyptians.

Compared with the relief of the nereids, the Isis relief has a thoroughly antique appearance. But on closer inspection quite clear signs of decadence become apparent. To take an obvious example, the arrangement of the folds; these have become completely decorative on the breast and the lower part of the body: around the breasts they form whorls and below the girdle almost concentric semicircles. The arms and hands are disproportionate and, moreover, woefully thin. The leg on which she stands is not



modelled through the robe, but merely covered with schematically rendered folds. Among her train, the fat *putti*, playing flutes or caressing birds, are particularly badly rendered, and the faces of all the beings represented are completely empty and expressionless. That of Isis is not ugly, but with its surface flatness, its large eyes and over-small mouth, all reduced to the simplest forms, it appears smooth and sullen. If we compare this Isis with the Tyche of Alexandria on the medicine box from Dumbarton Oaks, we can see that this relief, as well as that of the nereids from Aachen, is unmistakably a decadent late work from a dying world. One has only to compare the pose of the two women: the Tyche stands elegantly, perhaps even a little affectedly, Isis by contrast seems wooden. The background of the Tyche, with the curtain playfully drawn back by Eros, appears classical in contrast to the confusion surrounding Isis. The round-cheeked Eros with the mirror on the medicine box has nothing in common with the ugly masks and twisted limbs of those on the Isis relief. Tyche belongs to the antique world, but Isis is far removed from it. The carver of this relief wished to represent his goddess in the Hellenistic manner, but in spite of himself, non-antique artistic principles, like the *horror vacui*, have found their way into his work. The little box still belongs to the realm of great art, but this cannot be claimed of the Isis or the other surviving related reliefs in Aachen. Nor can it be said to be true folk art, for we can sense quite plainly that this relief aspires too high for that.

Plate 88

In addition, Bacchus appears twice, in both cases standing in the same attitude, which is taken over from Indian art: he leans casually upon his left forearm, his right arm held above his head and his legs crossed. He is surrounded by thick vine branches, which are completely separated from the background and have *putti* and animals in them. Two large leaves, decorated with three little balls at the base, hang down decoratively over the shoulder of the god. They form almost his only clothing, apart from a small thin cloak over his left shoulder, which is twisted round his left arm. The god's pose often occurred in much earlier ivory and bone carvings from Alexandria, but the fundamental difference between this Bacchus and the older representations of youths is in his proportions, which are poor in spite of his muscular figure. His little legs and delicate feet are much too small and weak for his powerful trunk and very large head. His face has the same somewhat empty, staring look as that of his companion, Isis. The god of wine, once so unruly, is depicted here as a rather stupid, elegant, slightly degenerately handsome young man, intent upon showing off his physical advantages. He does not even look drunk, but indeed rather sober. All in all, he is very un-Greek in spite of the attempt at the antique style. True, the carver is more skilful than the one who carved the nereid scene, but he is certainly no longer a Greek in the antique sense, nor yet a pupil of classical Hellas, steeped in the Hellenistic tradition. The noble nudity of antiquity has become, in his hands, an affected exhibitionism, the ideal beauty an empty smoothness, and the naturalness a pose. A weak, orientalized echo of the antique is all that remains, and one cannot imagine how this art should develop. The end has

Plate 89



come for the pagan Alexandrian-Greek world; the craftsman who carved these figures did not really know anything about the mature art of the late classical period, but he initiated a style resembling folk art, although, equally, it was far from being that of a genuine folk art.

That it was possible for this stylistic trend of the latest pagan art of the Egyptian capital to develop further, once the bonds tying it to mythological and symbolical motifs were loosened, is shown by the two ivory Madonnas in the Castello Sforzesco in Milan, and the Walters Art Gallery in Baltimore, which have been briefly mentioned above. They are usually dated to the eighth or ninth century, but this would seem to be too late. They are too closely related to the reliefs in Aachen, with which they also share a technical peculiarity not very common in ivory carving: they use the convex upper surface of the elephant's tusk as the upper surface of the relief, and thus form a half-cylinder. The faces with their large surfaces dominated by the eyes, resemble those of the Isis and the Bacchus in Aachen. In the Milan Madonna the very narrow folds of the garment are rendered in a style similar to that of the cloaks of the two Bacchus figures, while the Baltimore Madonna has harshly engraved, strictly parallel folds in a very unnatural schematic pattern, like those we see in reliefs from Herakleopolis Magna. It may be argued that the latter Madonna is a more provincial work than the former, but there is no apparent reason for dating them several hundred years later than the figures on the pulpit at Aachen. The later date would be justified only if the Aachen reliefs were also to be dated to the Umayyad period; but there are significant historical factors that run counter to this theory. We are satisfied that the creators of the Aachen reliefs could scarcely have been Copts. And in the Umayyad period the Greeks, especially those of Alexandria were no longer of any importance. The hatred of the Copts for all that was Greek had helped to drive the Greeks, especially those who played an active part in transmitting Greek culture, out of the country. We know of Alexandrian artists who emigrated to Cyprus and other places in the shrunken Byzantine empire. W. Schubart has succinctly discussed the changed position of the former ruling classes. When the Arab rulers destroyed Greek culture in Egypt, and before long also ousted the Greek language from public life, they were implementing a verdict which had already been pronounced; the Greek spirit had for long been no more than clinging desperately to life, and it was at the end of its inner strength. The Arabs founded their capital, Fustat, not far from the site of ancient Memphis, and took away Alexandria's precedence; if the Greek and the Copt still struggled together for centuries in the Church, also, this duly served to express symbolically what had happened; the tough natives of the country had passively or rebelliously withstood everything, but the thousand-year-long supremacy of the Greeks was at an end. According to Severos of Ashmunein (Arabic, Ibn Al Mukaffa), Amr, the conqueror of Egypt, had allowed the Coptic monophysite Patriarch, Benjamin, to come to Alexandria, and said to him: 'Concern thyself with the affairs of thy church; pray for me, that I may make my way further to the west and to Pentapolis (Libya), and

*Plates 35, 36*

*Plates 50, 51*



conquer these regions, as I have conquered Egypt. I can then come back quickly, safe and sound, and I will do for thee all that thou asketh.' That can only mean that the Copt had taken the place of the Greek in the cathedral of St Mark in Alexandria, and that Greek dominion over the Church, or rather the ever thwarted attempt to set up Greek dominion and maintain it, had finally been set aside by the order of the new masters of the country. It should also be noted that Islam showed a marked enmity towards paganism, but was tolerant towards Jews and Christians, the 'Peoples of the Book'. Taking all this into consideration, there seems no place for the Aachen reliefs in the Umayyad period. Greek artists, who might have created them, would hardly have been available any longer, as they would not have been able to earn their living in the Islamic state with its iconoclasm, unless they had been willing to go over to purely decorative work. Also they would hardly have dared to make such markedly pagan carvings. Furthermore, one of the Aachen reliefs shows an emperor being ceremonially crowned with a diadem by two Victories. This theme is ancient, originating in the East, and symbolizes the emperor's victory over the enemies of the empire. It is unlikely that an ivory carver would have dared to use this theme in Umayyad times. He would certainly have got into trouble for it. Finally we must remember for what purpose the Aachen reliefs were intended; as we have already said, they must have decorated a stool, or rather a folding chair. But a seat of this sort, decorated with such precious material, could only have been intended for two kinds of personages, either a very high-ranking official or a bishop. No one has so far suggested that the Aachen reliefs were intended for a bishop's throne; this would be absurd. There only remains, therefore, the high-ranking official. These did not exist in Umayyad times, apart from the fact that neither Arab nor Copt would have chosen pagan gods to decorate his chair of state. We must ascribe the reliefs to the last period of East Roman rule in the Nile Valley, the most probable date being the second half of the sixth century. They are also very similar in style to the plaque in Ravenna. This, however, belongs to the beginning of the sixth century, as the fashionable coiffure of the nymph shows. The fact that ivory carvings of Umayyad times are found to contain vine leaves with the three little balls at the base of the leaf is no proof that the Aachen reliefs are contemporaneous. Our knowledge of Alexandrian ivory carving of the latest period has so many gaps, that we are justified in attributing this small decorative detail to that particular period, for carving of this kind continued for purely ornamental work into Umayyad times. Plate 42

Since we must, for convincing historical reasons, place the Aachen reliefs in the period before the Arab conquest, it is advisable to date both the Madonnas to the same period. Plates 35, 36 They are not Coptic in the narrower sense of the word: they have indeed a much closer affinity with the Aachen reliefs, and so must be regarded as Greek works, to which, even though they have a Christian theme, we should apply the same criteria as to other pagan works of the time. Moreover, the way in which small figures are grouped round the main figure is a feature common to both. This is extremely characteristic, and is not found in



any other surviving work in ivory. On the right hand of the Madonna in Milan is the midwife, Salome, who touches the Child with her withered hand, and on the Madonna's left there is a magus, who holds aloft his gift. In each work the pair of angels is similarly related to the main figure, and subordinated to it by their smaller size and more modest rendering. In this way, a Greek ivory-carver has taken the great step from the traditional but dead world of mythology to the lofty themes of the Christian Church. And he has unquestionably succeeded. The strongly simplified forms, which passed over from the antique into the final phase of provincialized Alexandrian art, are particularly suited to the portrayal of the majesty of the Madonna. Although the carvings are relatively small — the Madonna in Milan is 15.5 cms high and that in Baltimore 25.5 — they have a thoroughly monumental appearance. Very much in contrast with the figures on the Aachen reliefs, these Madonnas are ceremonial cult images of awe-inspiring bearing and stature. With the simplest means an almost superhuman sublimity has been created, to which the newly achieved archaism of form is well suited. For we are not concerned here with the last traces of pagan sculpture, whose degenerate style showed that the Greek world was 'intrinsically at the end of its strength'. Rather, what can only be discerned beneath the surface of the Aachen reliefs has come to fulfilment here: the change has been effected from the weary, attenuated, late style, which simplifies forms because it has exhausted its means of expression, and only appears archaistic, to a genuine, new and deliberate archaism, which selects the forms suitable to its purpose and embodies them into a monumental whole. At the same time, a very definite and appealing simplicity has been achieved, which contrasts pleasantly with the over-burdened appearance of the Aachen reliefs. In this, Greek Christian Alexandria has found its medieval style and form of expression, having thrown off the remaining shackles of pagan-Hellenistic tradition. The Persian and then the Islamic invasions did not allow this style to develop very far, a bitter loss in view of this impressive beginning.

- Plate 36* The fact that the Madonna of Baltimore represents a type unknown in Byzantium before late medieval times has perhaps contributed to its late dating. While the Mother of God looks straight ahead, still and sorrowful, her Son lays His arm round her shoulders, and presses His cheek to hers. In contrast, the Milan Madonna holds her Son seated upright on her right hand; very solemn and dignified and looking like a little adult He raises His right hand in an expressive gesture. His Mother is enthroned in exalted inaccessibility, looking upwards away from the terrestrial world, instead of into the distance, like the Madonna of Baltimore. The latter shows a human and intimate side that is not seen in any of the early Byzantine types of Madonna that are known to us. The feeling inherent in the Child's pose, which is underlined by the way His Mother holds Him up to her breast, may seem unusual and strange, and compared with the hieratic solemnity of other ancient Christian and early Byzantine Madonnas, not at all antique in style. But must we therefore assume that this type did not originate in late antiquities? That the prototype was Byzantine? A. Grabar, when considering a Serbian miniature of



medieval date, came to the conclusion, without knowing the Madonna in Baltimore, that the type of Madonna known to scholars as 'Eleusa', such as we have here, has a 'Coptic' prototype. And we have already seen that in the Faiyum, Mary was represented in an even more human way, emphasizing still more clearly the relationship between mother and child in the picture of the Mother of God nursing her Child, which was then taken over in the paintings of Bawit and Saqqara. This type goes back quite certainly to the picture of Isis suckling Horus. But perhaps one may see in it and in the Eleusa type of representation not only a consequence of the Isis cult, but also a lingering testimony to Greek piety. Certainly, both types of Madonna come from Greek-settled parts of Egypt. The Greeks, however, did not remove divinities beyond the realm of worldly existence, but saw them as extremely human. Moreover, the human intimacy of the representation of Mary with her Child was eminently suited to the innermost beliefs of Greek Christendom, which saw in the incarnation of the Son of God the act of salvation in the history of God in relation to mankind. God became a human being in order that Man could come back to God — that is the gist of early Greek Christian teaching on redemption. But this necessitated the recognition of the complete and utter humanity of the Son of God, that is to say, just what the Council of Chalcedon had attempted to establish with its teaching on the relationship of the divine and the human in Jesus Christ. Would it be possible, however, to convey the essential humanity of the Son of God more clearly and convincingly than through an image like the Galaktophorousa or the Eleusa? These Madonnas derive from the spirit of Greek orthodoxy and not from the Monophysite ideas of the Copts, though they did indeed take over a type from the Greeks, characteristically enough the sternly dignified representation of the Galaktophorousa from the Faiyum. Plate 6

Without doubt the Milan Madonna is stylistically closer to the Aachen relief than the one in Baltimore. The latter is at the same time also the more complete in itself, dispensing as it does with smaller auxiliary figures apart from the angles; it is austerer in style and also more provincial. It may well be somewhat later than the Milan Madonna. Perhaps it belongs to the time of Cyrus of Phasis, who was Patriarch of Alexandria and at the same time imperial governor in Egypt from 631, a stern, indeed fanatical follower of the Church policy of his imperial master, Heraclius. The Milan Madonna, then, could be dated to the sixth century, since, in spite of all the great similarities, the differences in style between the two are so noticeable, that it is hard to assume that they are of the same period. It might possibly be dated to the time of the orthodox patriarch of Alexandria, John IV (570 - 580). It is not possible to be more exact.

Having established the sudden departure of Alexandrian ivory carving from its traditional themes, and finally too from its traditional forms, now become meagre and threadbare, we have an example of the silversmith's art that shows us that the art of the old Greek capital did not turn away from the classical form in every sphere. The silver votive or altar cross, dedicated by the nun, Theodote, in honour of Abbot Schenoute Plate 16



— very probably the great Coptic father of the monks and organizer of the monastic world — certainly has a Coptic inscription, but the incised pictures on both sides show such assurance in line, and elegance in the figure representation, that we cannot picture a Copt ever producing work such as this. Christ seems to stand in front of His Cross rather than hang from it, and His form is very slender, showing a graceful movement. His face is clean-shaven and youthful, and His curly hair reaches fairly far down to the nape of His neck. He wears a kind of tunic and a small mantle hangs from His shoulders, and the folds are flowing and well delineated. The faces in the medallions, Mary, John and an Archangel, are drawn with a few sure strokes; above all, the face of the bearded young man is very impressive. Only the figure of Theodote at the foot of the cross, holding candles in her raised hands, is somewhat cramped and not so confidently executed. This may be due to the somewhat narrow space which was at the disposal of the engraver but it may also be because he lacked an artistic prototype of such high quality as was available to him for the crucified Christ. For we know this prototype. It is exemplified by two gold crosses, one in Dumbarton Oaks and the other in Cairo; the type dates from the time of the Emperor Justin II (565 - 578). In contrast with the cross of Theodote, on which the nail-heads can be clearly seen in the hands and feet, and which therefore undoubtedly depicts the Crucifixion, the gold crosses show the return of Christ for the Last Judgement. They come from an urban workshop (which, in this case means from Constantinople), perhaps even one which worked for the imperial court. Since the gold cross in Cairo was found in Egypt it must be assumed that it was sent from the court to an orthodox Alexandrian patriarch. So this image of the youthful Christ became known, and was adapted to represent the Crucifixion on the silver cross of Theodote. This is done in a rather superficial manner, as the hands incline downwards from the horizontally placed forearms just as they do in the representations of Christ displaying His wounds on the gold crosses from Constantinople. Therefore the engraver had not understood correctly what his model was meant to convey, but he knew extremely well how to adapt his technique, since the gold crosses are embossed in relief, and this one is engraved. The cross cannot be dated with certainty, because unfortunately we do not know when the people named in the inscriptions lived and worked (besides Theodote and Mannu, there is also their companion, Matermute, both latter names being Coptic). The form these Coptic inscriptions take permits of only a very general dating of the seventh or eighth century, whilst the style of picture rules out a dating before the end of the sixth century. This cross, therefore, originated in the same period as the two ivory Madonnas. But for us what is more significant is that in this case an engraver in silver was not only in a position to make free use of a prototype taken from the imperial capital, but that he was prepared to do so. That is to say, that in the last phase of East Roman rule in Egypt the style of Constantinople, perhaps even the court style, was adopted in Alexandria and even used for a votive offering in honour of one of the Coptic leaders in the struggle against Greek Christendom. It was just at that time, towards the end of the











sixth century, when the two different types of representations of the Crucifixion were developed, that the Christ of the Parusie (the Day of the Last Judgement) also appeared in art. In the eastern Christian world there were no other models for the Crucifixion than those created by orthodox Greek artists. Thus a nun who in spite of her Greek name was very probably a Copt since her gift was dedicated to Schenoute, was obliged to take one of these Greek prototypes as a model when she wished to have the Crucifixion represented on her cross. If it originated in the seventh century at the earliest, as the style of the inscription suggests, then one is forced to the conclusion that the cross was made during the period of Persian rule in Egypt (619 - 629). At a time when Cyrus of Phasis ruled in the Emperor's name, it is hardly conceivable that an Alexandrian Greek would have worked for a Copt or that a Copt would have allowed an Alexandrian to work for her; in this short space of time the mutual hatred was too intense. The cross could scarcely be of a later date because Alexandria was evacuated in 645, and after the final conquest by the Arabs, Greek artistic life came to an end. This single work that came down to us by chance, shows very clearly that a few Alexandrian artists were still maintaining contact with the art of the empire. The cross of Theodote is in striking contrast to the Madonna of Baltimore; the latter represents a decisive departure from the antique and all its methods, the former a deliberate and successful link with the art of the imperial capital still drawing new strength from ancient roots.

We have come to know Alexandria only from late works. The reason for this is that the Hellenistic art of Egypt's capital, even when it was producing Christian works, is just as sharply divided from what is usually called 'Coptic' as is the art of Rome, Antioch or Constantinople. Except for the last phase, which we have been considering here, Alexandrian art belonged to the classical period of the Roman Empire, and is neither provincial nor does it in any way resemble folk art. It is only in the works we have first discussed that it is seen to approach provincial Greek art in the Nile Valley, while remaining artistically much superior to it.

We can learn what provincial Greek art of the late classical period in Egypt looked like from two centres: Antinoe (Sheikh Abada) and Herakleopolis Magna (Ahnas). The first of these particularly, the later of the two towns, has shown us a development from the third to the fifth century in respect of funerary stelae. We shall be able to see this development still more clearly if we examine some other monuments.

A fragment of relief in the Louvre, showing the nymph Daphne, belongs to the first phase of the artistic development of Antinoe. She rises from the branches of the laurel tree, which is interpreted here as an acanthus; the lower part of her body has already been transformed, from the hips down. It is the usual way of representing this scene of the myth. Her naked body is erect, and her raised arms grasp the leaves at the sides. Round her neck there is a rope-like band from which an enormous *bull*a is suspended between her breasts. The very large head has the same kind of well-shaped, serene, smooth, but expressionless face that we have already encountered on the funerary stelae. Plate 40



The hair is fashionably dressed and has a veil placed over it. This mode of hairdressing suggests a date at the end of the third century. It cannot be said that this representation of the nymph is actually ugly or unskilful, but it has characteristics that the connoisseur of classical art finds alien and repellent, in particular the formation of the pelvis. The lines of the groin are exaggerated, and the pudenda are so over-clearly defined that the representation has an exhibitionist effect, in spite of the lack of expression in other respects. The bosom is relatively restrained in its rendering, although it is more emphasized than is usual. So this Daphne might be taken rather for a temptress than for the modest nymph of mythology.

This prominence given to the primary sexual characteristics is general in the provincial Greek art of the Nile Valley, not only in the sculpture of Antinoe. It goes hand in hand with an ever-increasing neglect of the natural proportions. It is, moreover, also characteristic that in reliefs of this kind — we know several other pieces, for example, from Ahnas — Apollo is always missing, only the principal female character remaining from the myth. She looks more like a goddess of love, the mistress of an orgiastic cult, than the daughter of Gaia fleeing from Apollo's love. Mythology is obviously only being used here as a source of ideas for erotic works. E. Coche de la Ferté has very rightly emphasized the relationship of this Daphne to representations of Aphrodite, 'Coptic' ones naturally, not the classical goddess.

As a parallel to this attitude, so far from the classical, let us turn to poetry, and quote W. Schubart on a poet of the late Egyptian Greek world: 'What otherwise remained is particularly vividly exemplified by Dioscorus, 'the poet of Aphrodite', whose bombastic prose indeed shows his knowledge of rhetoric and literature, but in general has been deserted by all the better elements of Hellenistic speech and thought.' If we say 'erotic forms' instead of 'bombastic prose', 'iconography and mythology' instead of 'rhetoric and literature' and 'form' instead of 'language', then we have expressed exactly what there is to say about this relief. This pagan image shows a frivolous people, not so far removed from the often censured and almost proverbial obscenity of the Greeks of Antioch, the capital of Syria.

At this point one should remember Strzygowski's mistaken conclusion, in which he lays the responsibility for this 'nudity' at the door of the Copts on the grounds that 'Arian Hellas remained unintelligible to the Hamites, just as the spirit and form of the Gothic was to the Italians.' C. M. Kaufmann has endorsed this opinion and declares that the 'Predilection for intentional nakedness, which in the hands of the Egyptians easily became grotesque', is a 'typical Coptic-Hellenistic trait'. Kaufmann obviously means the emphasis on sexual characteristics when he speaks of 'intentional nakedness'. However, this stems from the Graeco-Egyptian world and shows the same spirit as we see in so many Alexandrian terracottas, which are often kept in the store-rooms of museums for fear of offending modern sensibilities. It has nothing to do with the Copts, Strzygowski's 'Hamites'. The term 'Coptic-Hellenistic' is a contradiction in itself. The roots



of the art they refer to come from that mixture of peoples which called itself 'Greek' and formed the ruling class in the land, which was strongly influenced by Asia Minor and the Orient. We should call attention here to yet another mistaken assessment. J. D. Cooney, who has done great service in investigating the late-antique art of Egypt, has said that the flowering of what is usually called Coptic art, and what he, according to the usual method, dates somewhat late, can be explained by saying 'that the native and the foreign peoples of Egypt had now become blended, and were in a position to produce a unified art.' This is not borne out by historical fact. There can be no question of a blending, the differences were too deeply rooted and were constantly being sharpened by religious difficulties. Furthermore with the best will in the world, we cannot speak of a unified art in the face of works from various towns and districts, which show quite distinctive differences. It is clear, moreover that not even that which is Coptic in the narrower sense of the word is in any way unified. What we have already seen in the sphere of funerary monuments makes this disparity quite clear.

All this follows from the unfortunate amalgamation of the whole artistic heritage of the Egyptian late-antique caused by Strzygowski's inadmissible extension of the concept 'Coptic art' to the works from Greek towns, and the untenable method of dating. The sculpture of Antinoe can help us to rectify this, since it enables us to find some sort of chronological sequence for its works. For this reason it is the most important example from among the abundance of known centres of late antique Greek provincial art on the Nile. A fragment of a niche in somewhat the same style as the Daphne relief is also to be found in the Louvre. In this case the proportions are better, above all the heads are not so over-large. But the work is possibly still more careless in many ways, and this is shown in the hands and forearms, as well as in the ugly way the frame-like eyelids are thickened. The pudenda are given as much prominence as in the Daphne relief.

Plate 45

The woman's bust in Recklinghausen showed us the new style of the early fourth century from the town of Osiris-Antinous, altered only in a few details. Some funerary stelae conformed to it. Now we can place beside them some of the reliefs used for architectural purposes. In the first place we must mention the astonishing figure of an angel from the fragment of a niche that we have already seen. It can be seen at a glance to be closely related to the *erotes* of the Paris fragment, and were it not that a cross stands above his curly head no one would think that an angel was intended by this winged boy. The stonemason who made him obviously knew more about *erotes* than about the Christian heaven. It is in the same tradition as the Paris fragment, the only difference being in the rendering of the eyes.

Plate III

Plate 46

A relief in the Ikonenmuseum in Recklinghausen leads us a step further. We have no direct proof that it came from Sheikh Abada but its appearance shows that it undoubtedly belongs to this group. Two busts appear on it, looking like medallions. They are apparently meant to represent women, though this can only be seen from their hair, as, in contrast with what we have just seen, no definite sexual characteristics are shown.

Plate 90



The robes, divided by deep grooves into broad and symmetrically parallel bands, envelop the bodies so completely that we have here the greatest possible contrast to the bold brashness of the other works. Between the busts a cross is represented, and beneath them there is a leafy branch, probably of laurel. The original purpose of the slab is no longer quite clear; it may have been an integral part of a Christian church or chapel, or it may have served as a funerary relief (busts as decorations for graves have appeared in Antinoe, as is shown by the bust of a woman in Recklinghausen), and then been put into a funerary chapel. This uncertainty leads to another; if the relief was originally in a church, the persons on it are very probably saints; this is shown by the laurel branch, the symbol of victory. But if it came from a funerary chapel, the busts represent two dead persons. Once again we find the dilemma which faces us in the great majority of late-antique finds from Egypt simply because we do not know their original purpose.

There is not much alteration in style. The faces have become somewhat more individual. One differs clearly from the other; the woman on the right has softer, prettier features and a smaller, fuller mouth, whereas the one on the left has a harder, more angular face and a sterner mouth. On the other hand the hair of both has extraordinarily thick strands, giving a cap-like appearance. What is new is the schematic division of the robes into bands, which is very reminiscent of Coptic forms as we find them, for example, in the stele of Rhodia. Nevertheless, one must not think here in terms of a 'Coptic' influence on the style, because the stelae of Antinoe of the third and early fourth centuries already show the formalization in the folds of the clothing characteristic of folk art, which is far removed from any naturalistic treatment. Another significant feature is that the background surrounding the figures and symbols is empty, as in the ancient Greek reliefs, and thus plays an important part in the general impression. We find nothing of the confusion of the *horror vacui*, obscuring the main subject, which is so characteristic of the Coptic stelae of Upper Egypt. The composition here is a clear and distinct whole, a little arid, and not very full of incident, extraordinarily sparse in decorative symbolism, cool and restrained in general impression, but harmonious and well balanced.

This relief cannot be very far removed in date from the Christian boy on the funerary stele in the Esch Collection; that is to say, we must place it at the end of the fourth century or the beginning of the fifth. Before that time it would be difficult to assume that such a markedly Christian work could come from a provincial Greek workshop. In contrast with the peculiar angel, distinct progress has been made here in expressing Christian feeling. Everything worldly is so completely suppressed that we can only guess whether they are meant to represent men or women. Figures on unquestionably pagan funerary stelae were also always clothed — naked figures on funerary stelae are very rare in late-antique Egypt — but they often held the symbol of their faith in their hands, as the boy on the Christian stele in the Esch Collection is very clearly doing. On the relief in the Ikonenmuseum the figures do not hold the cross, it hangs in isolation between them: it is thus not a personal possession granting salvation but an impersonal symbol.



A fragment of a niche or tympanum in Recklinghausen takes us still further, probably into the fifth century. In spite of its badly damaged condition, it can still be seen to consist of a parabolically formed central field, which was surrounded on both sides by the slope of a broken gable; to this carved surfaces were attached, of which only very few indistinct remains are preserved. This type of niche or tympanum is particularly well known to us from Ahnas. It is apparently a form of architectural decoration equally popular in the Greek settlements in Egypt. In Ahnas we find mythological scenes or single figures in the central field, often of quite unequivocal meaning, whereas in this case a man stands praying with raised hands, dressed in a tunic and *pallium*, with a cross hanging from a chain on his breast. The decoration is not carved with such hard clarity as in the related types in Ahnas, being softer and a little more rounded. The praying man clearly embodies a very different stylistic phase, in the sculpture of Antinoe. His body is somewhat out of proportion, in particular his legs are considerably too short, and the feet much too small; his arms are disproportionately long; and, were they not raised, would reach at least to his knees. But indeed a sense of proportion was never very evident in the sculpture from the town of Osiris-Antinous, with the exception of the *erotes* of the Paris niche and their Christian counterpart. It is the face and the treatment of the clothing that determine the difference in style. The broad, chubby face, with the slight smile on the parted lips is somewhat doughy, the forehead is very low, the expression rather stupid. There is scarcely any attempt to treat the folds of the garment in a decorative manner, though a few more or less natural ones are shown. Admittedly, the upper part of the *pallium*, which is drawn round the hips, still looks like a tube wound round the body three times, but there is a definite tendency to break away from the unnatural treatment of simple planes. On the other hand the Greek idea of relief, still so predominant on the slab with the two heads in Recklinghausen, has been given up in favour of the *horror vacui*: the empty surfaces of the central field are filled with large acanthus leaves, so that the background is almost completely covered. In this we can perhaps recognize an approximation to Coptic taste, while the new treatment of the clothing is reminiscent of what we know of the Christian funerary monuments from the Faiyum. The content of the fragment suggests that the figure represents a saint. A niche of this type could have surmounted a door; certainly the scale is very small (the fragment is 40 cms high and 55 cms wide), so that it could hardly have been a church door, more likely the doorway of a chapel or a niche on the inside wall of a church.

Plate 61

Plates 43, 50, 51

The bronze lamp in the form of a dove, now in Recklinghausen, may date from about the same period. It shows a heightened awareness of the living model, despite the schematic treatment of the feathers and a certain carelessness in detail, for example in the legs; the way the head turns gives it a very life-like appearance.

Plate I

The picture changes when we turn to the sculpture from Antinoe of the sixth century. As an example of this we have a tympanum in Recklinghausen. Its form is already considerably simpler than in the older fragments: an inner semicircular space is sur-

Plate 91



rounded by a concentric frame divided into three parts. The central space contains a bird with outspread wings; it is represented in a strictly frontal aspect, and the head, too, is turned to the front. Its breast and wing feathers are composed of thick and coarse leaf-like shapes which on the wings are framed with longer pinions. Only at the throat are the feathers depicted more finely, though they are merely incised. Round its neck is a thick fold which merges with the upper edge of the wings, and from this fold hangs a band to which a *bulla* should evidently be fastened. It is, however, indistinguishable from the feathers on the breast. The bird's talons are rendered in a clumsy and primitive way. This bird with the *bulla* — whether it is an eagle or dove is disputed and cannot be determined — is known to us already from Coptic funerary stelae from Upper Egypt, and also appears as a single figure in high relief, chiefly it would seem in the Coptic sphere. In some way it represented a symbol of the soul, but it cannot be more closely identified.

The decoration of the frame has become quite flat and extremely simplified, in parts purely abstract or very nearly so. The outermost part of the frame, for example, is decorated with a pattern that looks as if it consisted of hearts, but nevertheless is meant to be laurel, as it is shown beside the central medallion, where only the leaves and not the stems are represented. The decoration of the narrower middle strip is formed by simple diagonal hatching, making a sort of zigzag band, the points of which are cut off. And the tendrils with rosettes in the inner strip are worked in the manner of Coptic two-surfaced reliefs.

At the topmost point of the frame is placed a medallion surrounded by a laurel wreath. These laurel leaves are, if anything, still coarser than those of the frame. The medallion contains the bust of a man in which the characteristics of the fifth-century tympanum are intensified: this round face has an unpleasantly doughy and blurred look. The eyes in the plump face are no longer so dominant as in earlier examples, which can partly be put down to the fact that the pupils are no longer represented by carved circles, and so they lack the staring look. The small portion of the robe that can be seen is divided by quite parallel notches into v-shapes. The hair consists of eight sausage-shaped pads, arranged to look like a cap. Notwithstanding the ugly stylized effect, this gives us an indication of the date. For we know east Roman ivory carvings with the year of production marked on them, the so-called Consular Diptychs, which show us the fashions of gentlemen of the court. And among them appears, in the second decade of the sixth century, a man with his hair done in the same style (the diptych of the Consul Clemens, today in Liverpool, dated to the year 513). Clemens wears his longish hair in separate corkscrew curls down over the scalp on to the forehead. This is apparently the model for the man in our medallion. Since older men, to judge by the mosaics of San Vitale in Ravenna, wore this hairstyle until the middle of the century, our tympanum must have originated in the first half of the sixth century. It shows a clear degeneration of the local style of Antioch in the mask-like plumpness of the bloated face, the flat weakness of the



foliate decoration and the stylized way in which the bird is rendered, bearing no comparison with the Recklinghausen dove. Clear Coptic tendencies have come into the relief: the two-surfaced manner of carving shows this, as well as the use of the Coptic soul-bird. This tympanum illustrates in its own way what W. Schubart has said about conditions in Egypt in the sixth century: 'The country, once completely Greek in appearance, began to become Coptic, that is Egyptian. Greek still remained the official language under the Byzantine emperors . . . But in these Byzantine centuries the Egyptians became a power again, as Copts, and slowly but surely suppressed the Greeks.' Regarding the influence of the Church on the situation in Egypt he goes on to say: 'It was strong enough to set up the Copts, and strong enough to break off the Greeks.'

An even more eloquent witness to this than the tympanum we have just discussed, is the two-zoned capital in Recklinghausen, briefly considered earlier. In this the form of the lower zone has become completely Coptic and un-antique: it has the appearance of the baskets which the Coptic hermits wove to earn their daily bread. This kind of decoration of a capital is not found in the Greek and Roman antique. It is a Coptic development. And the birds in the corners of the upper zone are so unlike their real-life counterparts, that they remind us of a child's attempts at modelling. These birds are basically much more closely related to the peacock in Dumbarton Oaks than to the dove lamp, which comes from the same town as this capital. The little crosses in the place of bosses in the upper zone indicate that the capital probably came from a church. In its decoration at least, this Christian church in the Greek town of Antinoe must have had a distinctly Coptic appearance!

Antinoe provides us with the advantage, unfortunately very rare in late-antique Egypt, of being able to arrange the sculpture in a time sequence to a certain extent, and also to arrive at an approximate dating. For this reason its development has much to teach us. To start with it is pure provincial Greek, at its best by no means insignificant. For a century it shows hardly any development in style, apart from the different way of rendering the eyes. The usual type of stele is derived from those put up by provincial Roman soldiers and officials; the treatment of the relief is Greek. Not until the fifth century does a Coptic look gradually appear, at first only in the form of the *horror vacui*, hindering the clarity of the relief and surrounding the figures closely with foliate decoration. By the sixth century the Coptic influence is far more apparent and begins to affect the subject. It is unaffected by the art of the capital, the fashion of the court alone is observed. In the end the provincial Greek style gives way to pure Coptic. Now a centre of provincial Greek art has become Coptic, and 'the spine of the Greek world has been broken'. This was not only due to Greek culture being isolated in a foreign environment and receiving no transfusions of fresh blood, so that it slowly withered, but also to the deep social changes that took place here. To quote W. Schubart again: 'Already in the third century the prosperous and educated Hellenes of the towns had been brought low by the burden of honorary posts and public service. The general uncertainty in the

Plate 30

Plate 19

Plates 40, 45, 72

Plate 61

Plate 91

Plate 30



empire, the borders of which were threatened by the barbarians, if not breached by them, hampered any peaceful work and destroyed faith in the immediate future... In this economic collapse those who had up till then been pillars of Hellenism were reduced to poverty, and even to the ranks of the proletariat. They could maintain their position only if they had, not money but possessions; that is to say, if they were landowners. Out of the chaos arose great estates... These increasingly arrogant barons were indeed for the most part Greeks, but hardly pillars of Hellenism; rather, they were a small class who forced the peasants and towns into a dependent position and seized what was left of the power of the state for themselves: they were a feudal nobility with almost princely power. It was Justinian, the reformer of the empire, who first attempted to restore its rights to the state. But there was no longer any question of strengthening and protecting Hellenism, as the emperors of the first and second centuries had known how to do, the economic foundations having been cut from beneath the feet of this social class which in its weakened state was facing pressure from the Christian Copts.' The landowners mentioned here lived for the most part in the Greek metropolises and towns, one of which was Antinoe. Thus in these few settlements the Greek way of life was maintained in a somewhat provincial form; but the slow social and economic decline of the former Greek middle classes lowered their social standing to the level of the Copts, although they retained their language and their faith. This explains the way in which the sculpture of this town gradually became 'Coptic'. We can assume that the man in the medallion on the Recklinghausen tympanum, who wears the fashionable hair-style of the imperial capital, is one of the landowners — who else in far off Antinoe would have had the opportunity of getting to know fashions from Constantinople, let alone following them? But the craftsmen who made the tympanum for him — perhaps for his funerary chapel — were very probably Greeks from Antinoe who had already become 'Coptic' in a social sense, and as a logical consequence of this, culturally also. Here, for once, one can clearly grasp the connection between artistic and sociological development which is often assumed — and very often incorrectly!

One last word on the art of Antinoe: it was not very intensive. This remained true when Christianity had taken over this former stronghold of paganism. The cross took the place of other symbols of death and the hope of life in the next world, that is all. E. Coche de la Ferté can be challenged on his assumption that the *erotes* of the fragment of a gable in the Louvre, are cherubim, and that the object that they both hold is a *flabellum*. If that were so, then the remarkable angel on the fragment of a niche obtained from the art market, would not be the only example of its kind, and Antinoe could claim the somewhat doubtful fame of introducing into Christian art male angels blatantly 'nude' in the sense discussed by Strzygowski. But is this interpretation of the Louvre fragment correct? In my opinion, the two winged boys do not hold a *flabellum* but a flower, perhaps a kind of zinnia. In this case there is no necessity to consider these *erotes* to be Christian angels, let alone cherubim. The new faith, therefore, opened up

Plate 45

Plate 46



no important iconographical developments, in spite of the possibilities it offered to the artists of the Greek town. Faced by this poverty of spirit, one is inclined to agree with C. M. Kaufmann, at least as regards Antinoe, when he writes: 'If we consider only the Christian monuments, what strikes us above all, apart from the total lack of works that can be certainly dated to before the seventh century . . . is the great weakness of the figure sculpture'. Referring to Strzygowski, whom he quotes, he states further that Christendom took as little pleasure in figure sculpture in Egypt, as elsewhere in the orient for a long period of time, except for western, that is to say Hellenistic, Asia Minor and the large towns of Antioch and Alexandria. Strzygowski's much too sweeping opinion can no longer be upheld today. He himself revised it many times later. Whether Kaufmann's statements about all that which, following Strzygowski, he has included under the heading of Coptic art, are correct, is yet to be proved. To all appearances they have some validity for Antinoe. But, equally, it probably has little to do with lack of skill or artistic invention in the people of Antinoe, but rather with the social developments which were responsible for the slow process of Coptic influence. Hellenism which had lost its social standing could produce little that was new in artistic conception, and judging by all that we know of the landowners, they were not really patrons of the arts. So new ideas were necessarily largely lacking, since there was no incentive from the Church or above all from the state.

Much more material has come down to us from Ahnas than from Sheikh Abada. As the only complete group of late antique work in Egypt so far known, it has found a compiler in U. Monneret de Villard, who has devoted a particularly comprehensive monograph to the sculpture of Herakleopolis Magna. His collection of material is unsurpassed, and his knowledge of the characteristics of this art has contributed greatly to modern scholarship. The connoisseur of late antique provincial art can see at first glance clear influences from Palmyra, the trading centre in the Syrian desert. M. Cramer has said with admirable brevity of the sculpture from Ahnas: 'There is nothing consciously pre-Coptic here, except in so far as the motifs are from Graeco-Roman mythology of the transitional style between Graeco-Roman and Coptic.' It is necessary to warn against the use of the term 'pre-Coptic' because it derives ultimately from Strzygowski's incorrect definition of the term 'Coptic' in the history of art. Apart from that it is not quite clear how artists in an Egyptian provincial metropolis could consciously create something which preceded a future style, and germinate it at the same time, as it were. We are, however, grateful to accept the evidence regarding the provincial Roman-Greek, which conforms with all that we have so far attempted to make clear.

From the authenticated Ahnas material, or what very probably comes from there, it can generally be premised that it makes use of preponderantly pagan motifs, of which we have already mentioned many. It must be added that for a long time we possessed no fixed point on which we could base a chronology for the sculptures from Ahnas. Essentially, everything rested on Strzygowski's method of judging by instinct, which is no



method at all. We can detect, clearly preserved in the mass of three different styles, material, of which one is quite uncharacteristic, and appears to me to be imported, while the two others differ from each other only in a few small details, similar to the works from the first two stylistic periods of Sheikh Abada.

The town of Herakleopolis Magna was the capital of the Heraklitan nome, which adjoined the Faiyum to the south. In the year 325 there was already a Christian community there, whose bishop took part in the first Ecumenical Synod of Christendom in Nicaea. Near the town lay the village of Koma, the home of St Anthony, the leader of the Egyptian anchorites. Otherwise the metropolis played no part worth mentioning in late antiquity. It appears as though the Christian community was predominantly Coptic and we have no evidence here to show that the Greeks held so obstinately to their beliefs, as we happen by chance to know they did in Antinoe. But considering the traditional attitude in general of the Egyptian Greeks, apart from those in Alexandria, they would hardly have done anything else.

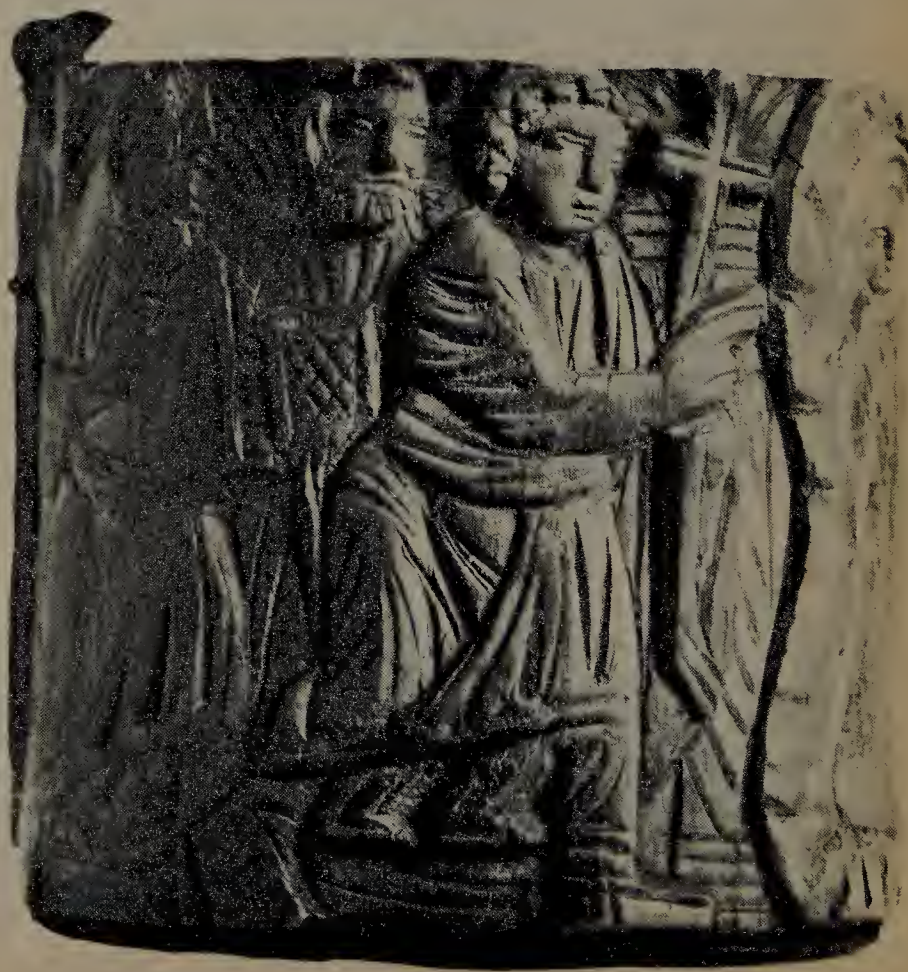
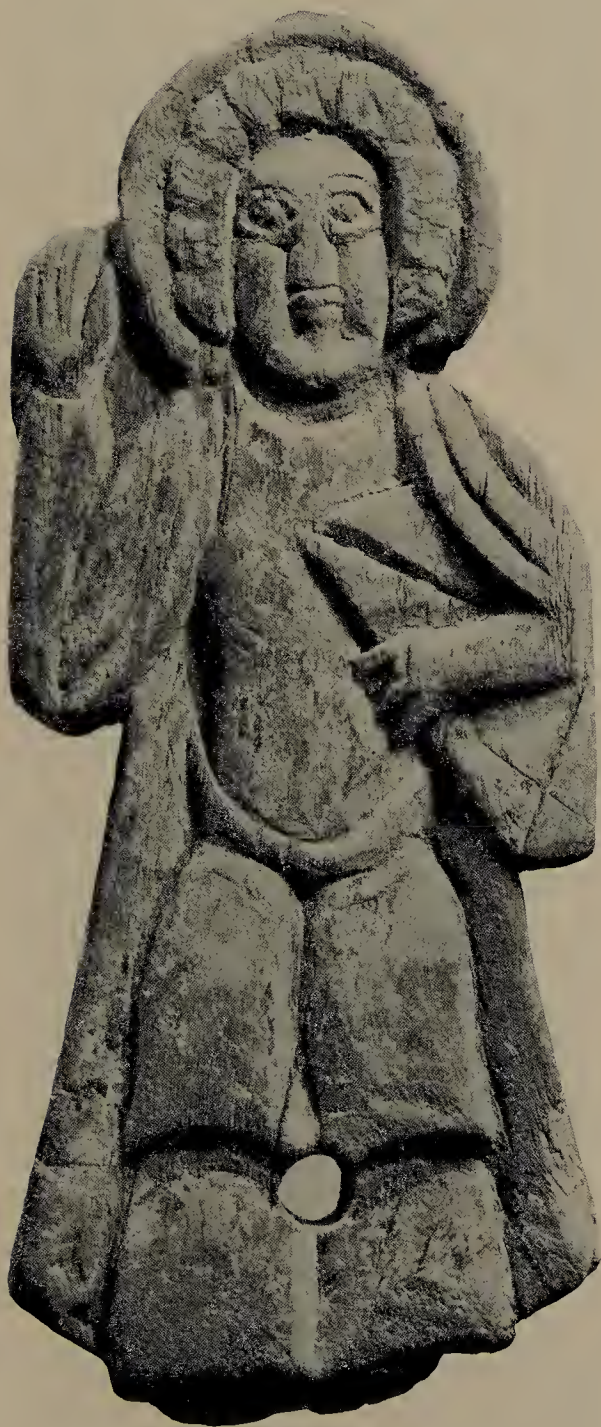
Plate 10 A single piece of sculpture from Ahnas may be dated with some degree of certainty. Unfortunately, as already pointed out, it is completely unlike any other sculpture from the town. It is the relief of a struggle with wild animals, which we have already compared with the Herakles relief from the same place. Two hunting scenes, typical of Roman historical or mythological friezes, are placed close together on the slab. To the left a clothed huntsman raises his arm to strike a bear, which has reared itself on its hind legs, and with outstretched head and open jaws, gropes for its enemy. To the right a naked youth thrusts his hunting spear into the body of a lion, which is poised to spring and claws at its opponent. Trees and leaves cover the background everywhere, so that hardly any space remains. We are therefore faced here with a certain *horror vacui*. But it differs from that in Coptic art, in being a sort of scenery, showing where the hunt is taking place, and not merely unrelated decoration used to fill the empty space in the background. This is a Roman style. The theme is equally popular in Roman art of the late antique, especially in the third century and the first decade of the fourth, thus in a period during which the art of the empire, originally influenced by Hellenism, was periodically mixed with new provincial features inspired by folk art. It is true that our relief is of an unusual primitiveness and far below Roman folk art in quality. But equally a barbarized execution of this kind does sometimes occur in Roman provincial art, for example in the Balkan provinces. We must regard the relief therefore as one of the few Roman provincial works from Egypt. If it is examined more closely, it can moreover be seen that the stonemason still knew a great deal about the proportions of the human body. And though the muscles are little more than indicated in the naked huntsman, yet they are correctly shown. The composition as a whole is charming, lively, and shows good observation of nature. Even though the bear and the lion are badly drawn in many anatomical details or strongly stylized, their appearance is true to life and characteristic. One can even see the difference between the massive bear who tries to seize its opponent in its teeth and



- 94 Christ in triumph.  
Detail from an earthenware dish

- Below right:  
95 Christ raising Lazarus. Ivory pyx

- 93 A saint. Fragment of a carved  
wooden icon









tear him with its claws, and the sinewy lion springing to strike down the huntsman with its mighty paws. And finally, the attitudes of the two huntsmen in their struggles are very strikingly represented: the raising of one arm to strike the bear, and the powerful thrust of the other are both shown, together with the correct stance of body and legs. The stonemason was certainly not a master of style, but a faithful observer, who, although he could not master all the details, knew how to compose a picture skilfully (though this may perhaps be traced back to a model he used) and to represent the movements of men and animals clearly and correctly. The theme indicates the approximate date. Because it was obviously made by, and probably for, a Roman, it can be assumed that it would not be too much behind the current fashion. One can therefore venture to suggest a date in the late third century, or the first half of the fourth.

We cannot praise the craftsmanship of the Herakles relief in the same way as we have praised that of the hunting relief. The hero stands in a rather boastful attitude in the centre of the slab. His head is unfortunately missing, his outstretched left arm, wrapped in a little cloak, holds the Nemean lion, apparently by a broad collar, one end of which is wound round the hero's wrist. One must call to mind the ancient Greek myth in order to realize how grotesque this representation is. Herakles is supposed to have forced the invulnerable lion into a cave and there strangled it; after that he used the lion's head as a helmet and its pelt as armour. Here he leads a weak-kneed lion by a collar, like a well-trained dog, and the lion appears to grin in a friendly way with toothless jaws. It could hardly be more unheroic. But nevertheless a *Nike* (victory goddess) approaches with a dancing step, holding a wreath and a palm branch for the hero as reward for his triumph. Even as late as the seventh century there were thrilling and convincing representations of Herakles' struggle with the lion, but here it becomes a circus turn. It might almost be thought that we have here a satire on the myth of the mighty hero, such as there were in the late Greek theatre; but it must be remembered that the hero was the patron of this metropolis, indeed of the whole nome, and therefore one must conclude that this caricature was meant seriously.

Plate 9

It is also very difficult at first to accept the above conclusion when one considers the modelling of the relief; we have already mentioned the pose of the hero as well as the movement of the *Nike*, both of them are equally heavy and obtrusive, as well as artistically unsatisfactory. The details of the relief are even worse. Herakles has a boyish torso, but the remaining arm is as large as that of a giant; the fist almost as large as the head of the *Nike*. If one takes into consideration the fact that Herakles' club is at his right side, and that he must quite obviously have supported himself on it with his right hand, it can be seen how vast this arm, too, must have been. What emerges from this is again a caricature and not a picture of super-human strength. But we must not be too harsh in our judgement: there is something child-like at the same time in this method of representation: Herakles was the symbol of superlative strength; he had mastered the lion with his bare hands; so the sculptor made the arms and fists unnaturally large as the source of



his hero's strength, as though he wanted to say to the observer 'Look, he did it with these!'

The relief is almost free-standing, and its creator has really tried to make his figures truly life-like. Seen as a whole, in the case of Herakles this has succeeded to a certain extent, but the representation of the naked body requires that muscles should be well-moulded, and this is missing here. The rib-cage with the sketched-in ribs, like the pectoral muscles, are poorly depicted, and are placed flatly and schematically so that one can scarcely believe in the legendary strength of the hero. The representation of the naked male body which was so splendidly successful in classical and Hellenistic art has been bungled. It cannot be said that another form of artistic expression is intended here. The thoroughly successful rendering of the lower part of the body, the well-observed rounding of the belly, the striking and well-formed upper thigh, and the clear and correct placing of the groin, show that the stonemason knew well enough what he wanted to do and that he had based his work on antique representations of the human form. He was unable to carry it out correctly only through lack of artistic skill. When we put this relief in place in our imaginary museum, we said that we could feel the sculptor's efforts to put the antique myth into a form he found suitable. He was not lacking in endeavour, apparently, but the living relationship with antique art was lacking, as well as personal talent. What has been created here in honour of the town's patron is, in fact, nothing more than a sorry and utterly provincial relic of antique art. The relief stands on the threshold of folk art, but does not have the latter's naïvety, and is much too ambitious. This can also be seen in the figure of the *Nike*, who looks almost like a siren, her legs resembling those of a bird. Because of this her dancing pose acquires an accidental comic effect.

We have placed this unsatisfactory relief at the head of the second group of works from Ahnas because, in contrast to the provincial Roman piece (which, in spite of its poor quality, appears so immediate and primitive and thereby so genuine), it sets about rendering a basically similar theme in a completely different way. But though it fails to be a fitting memorial to a hero's triumph, through lack of artistic skill, so that the triumph is turned into a burlesque, it does show a number of characteristics which we shall find again in numerous other works. These stylistic traits are principally as follows: the division of the *Nike*'s robe into bands, which is very characteristic of folk art; the geometrical and linear rendering of the muscles on the naked torso of the hero; the plump cheeks of the *Nike*; her large eyes with the circular, deeply cut pupils; the high relief, and the inclusion of the background decoration in the general impression.

Plate 53 The Orpheus in the Cairo Coptic Museum, for example, belongs to this group from Ahnas. Its provenance is not documented, but the style of the figure makes it certain that the relief could only have come from Ahnas. The famous Greek singer sits on an upholstered chair, naked but for a little cloak wrapped round his left leg. His gigantic eyes stare out from a head which is much too large and he holds his lyre in his left hand. His entire appearance strikingly resembles that of the Herakles, except that his torso is even



thinner and his muscles more sparsely and schematically indicated; they consist solely of a scored line rising vertically from a deep navel and two very slightly raised semi-circles. In contrast the male organs are very large and very obviously exhibited. There is undoubtedly a resemblance to the sculpture from Antinoe, which is certainly due to similar circumstances and the same kind of cultural background, but the difference, which one can hardly put into words, is unmistakable. The sculpture of both Greek settlements was created in the same spirit, and is similarly an offshoot of classical art in the deepest provinces, but that of Herakleopolis Magna looks still further removed, and in many respects is more grotesque and strange. Orpheus, for example, looks like a primitive idol, not the great singer of Greek legend. The large head with the staring eyes and little mouth beneath the long thin nose has something unreal and mask-like about it, which startles and amuses at the same time. Of course, since the pupils were originally inlaid with some other material, which has since been lost, the emptiness of the look could not have had so surprising an effect as it has in its present state.

Venus in the shell with the somewhat damaged sea-god who is paying court to her, also belongs to the same group. A slight alteration in style can be seen in the niche gable with Pan and a maenad. Not only of significance is the fact that the maenad, who appears to be fleeing from the god, wears a crisply pleated garment that entirely hides her shape, but also, and above all, that the figures are differently and better proportioned and the folds are of a very odd sort, sharply ridged and largely parallel. They are reminiscent of the way in which the mane of the crouching lion in Berlin is rendered. Similarly decorative and schematic in appearance is Pan's goat-skin, which looks like chain-mail. Here the step into folk art has been taken. Only the theme remains classical, its execution has no longer much in common with provincial Greek art. The details of the figures follow the same stylistic pattern as the hard-cut and abstract acanthus decoration in the architectural framework, and the deep contrast between light and shade is seen in the figures in the centre as well as in the ornamental surround. The decoration of the framework extends into the background of the tympanum, so that the impression that this gives of a *horror vacui* approaches very closely to what could be called Coptic in the narrower sense of the word.

The niche with poet and his muse looks somewhat different. Here the folds of the robe are not so sharply ridged, and appear much more delicate, softer and narrower, but basically the style is very closely related to the one above.

Besides this group we can place another, containing the identical figures, which at first glance gives a different impression in one respect. Let us look at the Venus crouching in her shell, in a niche, now in Cairo. The body of the goddess is of fragile grace, slim like that of a very young girl, with breasts that are scarcely indicated. Her pose is elegant and completely natural. Her face, with its slightly slanting, almond-shaped eyes, is a pointed oval in shape and bears a faint, alluring smile. In her raised right hand she holds a mantle, which is spread behind her like a curtain. The folds of this curtain are sharply ridged like

Plate 38

Plate 50

Plate 22

Plate 51

Plate 39



those on the robe of the maenad fleeing from Pan, but they are skilfully rendered and well observed. On the whole this nymph appears much more classical than those figures we have just seen, especially too as the decorative frame-work does not show the same kind of sharp-edged treatment which is otherwise very common in Ahnas. At the same time,  
*Plate 40* this goddess has a slightly lascivious air, which can only be compared with the Daphne from Sheikh Abada. Her pose and her smile show her pleasure in love and life.

*Plate 37* The very frank relief showing Leda and the Swan is stylistically similar. The work is of lower quality artistically, and the proportions are worse and the details coarser, but  
*Plate 43* they are unmistakably of the same school. The remarkable Nereid with the sea-monster, which is of similar quality to the Venus, belongs to this group also. Finally we should  
*Plate 58* mention two reliefs showing the god of wine, the one on a door gable, now in Cairo, and  
*Plate 57* the sullen Dionysos in Dumbarton Oaks. These both show the same pose, adapted from Indian art, as the two Bacchus figures on the reliefs in Aachen Cathedral. Of course these two representations of the god of wine can only be linked with the above three reliefs to a certain extent, because the proportions are very unsuccessful here, the heads above all being too big. Besides this, they are both almost enmeshed in the vine and are surrounded by a very strongly contrasting light and shade effect.

Apart from these two clearly differentiated groups we find some pieces which are not certainly established as coming from Ahnas, but show strong resemblances in style to the two groups, though they cannot be placed directly in either. Perhaps they show the  
*Plate 55* transition from one to the other. In the first place the bust of a crowned god on the fragment of a decorated column should be named. A stern dignity cannot be denied him. The decorative stylization of the symmetrically formed face, especially noticeable in the beard and hair, has an odd, strange beauty. The sculptor who created this god can without doubt claim the honourable name of artist. But the treatment of the details show that he came from the same artistic milieu as the men who made the reliefs mentioned above, that is, Herakleopolis Magna. And one detail, the folds on the clothing of the small figure on the god's right shoulder, shows that this work is related to the first group from Ahnas. The pupils of the eyes, however, are not raised, but merely sketched in.

Of the same type is a relief slab, now in the Brooklyn Museum, which shows the god  
*Plate 56* of the Nile with a very much damaged figure of Gaia. Much here is considerably rougher than in the bust of the crowned god, the pectoral muscles, for example, but the same style is unmistakable. The pupils here show clear traces of paint, which might well be seen as a forerunner of the method of inlaying the pupils with another material.

*Plate 59* It is doubtful whether the sullen Dionysos in his ox-cart, in Dumbarton Oaks, comes from Ahnas. The decoration of the frame certainly shows the strong contrast between light and shade, but it is curiously inconclusive in detail. The manner in which the face and the folds of the garment are represented shows links with the niche of the poet and his muse, but the eyes have only a little hole for the pupils. This piece has much of folk  
142 art in it: the god of wine drives his wagon like a country vintager, except that his goal



is not the wine-press, but a little round temple; it is perhaps an off-shoot of the larger group first dealt with above.

The Christian works that we have from Ahnas are not important in subject, and belong in style to the first of the two large groups.

What is the position regarding the dating of these reliefs? W. F. Volbach, in his latest work, considered them to be late forms among the products of the Hellenistic spirit in Egypt. Is this all that can be said? If we can assume a certain parallel development with the sculpture of Antinoe, the picture is greatly changed. We ought then to consider the group containing the Venus crouching in her shell as preceding the work from Herakleopolis Magna. The spirit of sensual joy still living in the three works first mentioned above, which is also expressed in the drunken Bacchus, supports this view. Here we still have a Hellenistic feeling for art, though in a provincial, simplified, and coarsened form, which has not lost or given up its inward bonds with the spirit and the style of late Hellas and its forcing house in Alexandria. We may surmise that this group dates from the third century. It cannot be determined whether the two figures of Bacchus date to the fourth century, but they must be placed there. The transition to the other large group of reliefs from Ahnas is introduced by two solemn and forbidding representations of gods, something similar to a selfconscious recognition of Greek paganism in the face of the surge of Christian-Coptic feeling in the country around. Not much of this idolatrous sublimity remained later, and it was succeeded by an alarming emptiness and stupid posturing, which spoke unmistakably of spiritual exhaustion. This development cannot be dated, for historical reasons, before the second half of the fourth century, and we must once more mention in this connection, the Herakles and Orpheus reliefs. The last phase is reminiscent of folk art, or, to put it another way, works like the gable niche with Pan and the maenad, and the poet with his muse, and perhaps also, the peasant-like Bacchus have become Coptic. The Christian works follow on to this, and with that we may presume that we have reached the fifth century.

Naturally these dates are merely suggestions, which cannot be confirmed until all the Egyptian material of the late antique is listed according to where it was found, and its style critically examined. Objection can be made to this attempt to form a chronology of the works from Ahnas on the grounds that it, too, follows a theory of decadence. But we are not dealing here with decadence in its outward form, but in spiritual content. We must take into account that the Greeks in Egypt who remained true to paganism were ever increasingly cut off from their origins by the speed and thoroughness of the advance of Christianity among the Coptic population, who in numbers formed the overwhelming majority. The Greeks were forced on to the defensive, and to all this was added that loss of social position, mentioned by W. Schubart, which naturally contributed to the loss of the Hellenic spirit. We can clearly see in the development that we have here assumed, how the Greeks in Herakleopolis Magna were slowly drained of their energy, and finally ended with much the same status as the Copts. We can trace how a provincial art that



drew its inspiration from the seemingly inexhaustible source of the Hellenistic spirit and culture became a folk art with nothing in common with the antique, because of religious isolation and widespread social degradation. In my opinion, the historical truth of the suggested chronology lies in this. I would not venture to place these reliefs in the sixth century, because at this time it is difficult to imagine that exaggeratedly pagan themes, often obscene, would have been portrayed, since by the sixth century the remainder of the Egyptian Greeks were for the most part Christian.

We have pictured how in two Greek centres of the Nile Valley the artistic development led from provincial art to a Coptic type of folk art. We have recognized the spiritual and social background of this development, and have at the same time established that the new religion, Christianity, finally accepted by the Greeks in Egypt, did not lead to any new aspect worth mentioning in imagery. Must we therefore accept the harsh verdict that was put forward by Kaufmann, and echoed by Schubart that the Church was strong enough to break the back of the Greek world?

This is not quite so. Certainly, in Antinoe the Christian influence in art was restricted to the introduction of crosses, and in Herakleopolis Magna it was not much different. But we must emphasize that Christian iconography in the Greek-Christian art of Egypt can be thanked for two particularly human and tender images of the Madonna: the Galaktophorousa and the Eleusa, the mother suckling her divine Child and the mother tenderly embraced by her Child. These are creations of the Egyptian Greeks who professed Christianity. If we had nothing else, these alone would be convincing evidence against the idea that Christianity took no pleasure in figure sculpture. Where creative work of this kind is possible, there is a genuine and powerful effort to express the new faith not only in superimposed symbols, as in Antinoe and Herakleopolis Magna, but also in an artistic expression worthy of the theme.

To this must be added a theme, which also spread into Coptic art, and which we have already seen in a relief from Achmim, the ancient Panopolis. Strzykowski originally regarded the mounted saint as characteristically Coptic. When later he wished to trace the origins of Christian Church art back to Persia, he pointed out the fact that in Zoroastrian times good spirits and gods were shown mounted. In fact the cliff reliefs of the Sassanian kings bear eloquent witness to this. Numerous examples from the spheres of Mesopotamian and Armenian culture appear to support this theory of Strzykowski's. Research into the late history of the Roman Empire has provided the compelling proof for the theory that the Persian armoured cavalry had forced the emperors to attach heavy cavalry to the Roman army also, at a higher rank than had been customary up till then. The picture of the mounted conqueror appears also in Roman art, showing him galloping impassively through the confusion of the battle. This originally military concept has obviously influenced Christian iconography. Strzykowski mentions late Arab sources which inform us on this subject that in Palestine too the representations of mounted conquerors had been supplanted by that of the mounted Christ. Nothing remains of these.



Only in Egypt do we still find mounted saints among the rich heritage of late antique art that has survived. The earliest example is the relief from Achmim, which almost certainly dates from the fifth century. Artistically it is no great achievement, although it does allow us to recognize clearly a very much weakened provincial Hellenistic tradition. But its subject shows us how the Greek Christians on the Nile knew how to take over a motif that was completely non-Christian in origin and significance. The meaning, which was used for the original Persian type of mounted god, was transferred without much difficulty to the saints and to Christ himself: this original type was a symbol of the victory of good over evil; a victory, therefore that could equally well symbolize the life or the martyrdom of a Christian saint or Christ's death on the cross for the salvation of the world. It may seem astonishing that it was the Christian Greeks on the Nile who adopted this theme and handed it on to the Copts. But it should not be forgotten that a not inconsiderable number of the first Macedonian settlers of Ptolemaic times came from Thrace, that is to say, from the people whose own gravestones predominantly showed a mounted god. The concept, therefore, cannot have been absolutely strange and new to the 'Greeks' in Egypt. At least there was a certain predisposition towards it already. This theme, which was not native to Egypt but was taken over by Christianity there, is not quite in accordance with the theory of the sterility of the Christianized Greek Egyptians in the field of sculpture.

*Plate 14*

Further, we should mention Menas, the national saint of Egypt. The representation showing him between two camels is very ancient. Human figures standing between two antithetically represented animals had already appeared in Sumerian art. There, however, they mostly represented a struggle with animals: the human figure overcame both animals at once. In contrast the camels here are like Daniel's lions, attributes of the saint. Here, too, can be seen an old pagan theme, adapted for Christian purposes. Such adaptations are customary in ancient Christian art, but they are not signs of a lack of inventiveness, but rather of a misunderstanding that becomes constructive, or of independent assimilation. That Greek Christendom in Egypt was also capable of this should not pass unobserved.

*Plates 12, 13*

A new wave of artistic vitality, of Greek origin, reached Egypt from Byzantium. It is true that Kaufmann has asked 'where is the evidence that it was Egypt and not Constantinople that did the borrowing?' He wanted to challenge the theory of G. Maspero and A. Gayet that Coptic art was only an offshoot of Byzantine art. He was certainly right because in general this theory is wrong. But the fact that there was Byzantine influence in the sixth century cannot be denied. We need not go into this in detail since it is more clearly to be seen in wall painting, which, strictly speaking, belongs to the sphere of Byzantine history of art. But since it also is generally included in the term 'Coptic art', it must be touched on briefly. This wave of Byzantine influence can be seen most clearly in the architectural fragments from the Monastery of St Apollo in Bawit. We have already mentioned one of the surviving friezes and observed its harsh clarity and cool, abstract

*Plate 26*



construction. The forms are crystal clear and look as if they have been cut out with a knife from a brittle material. The background of the relief is largely covered; where it is empty it is entirely in shadow; the patterns do not blend into one another, no rounded form breaks the sharp-edged appearance. This method, especially because of the striking contrast between light and shade, may at first appear very Coptic, as is to be expected in one of the great Egyptian monasteries. But if we look beyond the borders of Egypt we find the same tendencies in Constantinople in the decoration of church buildings during the Justinian period. All that we have considered to be characteristic in the frieze from Bawit is equally true for the churches of SS Sergius and Bacchus and of Sancta Sophia. This essentially un-antique form of decoration appearing in the fourth decade of the sixth century, is actually characteristic of the architecture of the capital in the time of Justinian. The difference between it and the older architectural decoration has been happily put as 'between a living plant and a dried and pressed specimen from a herbarium' (P. Schweinfurth). The contrast between light and shade predominates here too. The cornices and tori in the church of SS Sergius and Bacchus are particularly similar to the example in Bawit. There can be no doubt from whence the stonemasons who made the frieze in Bawit drew their inspiration and this is also true of the rest of the very considerable remains of architectural decoration from Bawit. Their work is in the latest style of the Justinian period; the piece illustrated here is of such quality that one is almost tempted to take it for the work of craftsmen from the capital. But this need not be considered a certainty since the sculpture from Ahnas shows that the tendency to decoration of this kind was present throughout the Egyptian-Greek world. This made it possible to take over without alteration the new styles from Constantinople.

Plate 29

We can also see the same dependence on Byzantium in the large column-capital, now in Berlin. Such a bell-shaped capital with its upper zone containing figures of animals, can be found, for example, at the east entrance of Sancta Sophia. The lions on the piece from Bawit have nothing in common with either ancient Egyptian or with Coptic representations of lions, and it is easy to see that they are derived from late Roman forms, such as those on sarcophagi. And the clearly arranged, sharp-cut decoration of the lower zone in which only the grapes appear as rounded forms, is directly related in form and technique to the decoration of the capitals of Constantinople in the Justinian period. The piece from Bawit does not have the over-refinement of the capitals from Constantinople, it is simpler and clearer in its structure, but it is basically of the same type. This fashion of working the decoration (*à jour*) is as rare in the architectural sculpture from preceding epochs in imperial art, as in the late antique art of Egypt. It occurs in late Roman times, certainly, in glass-cutting as decoration of the extremely valuable diatreta glass, but before the Justinian period no attempt had been made to adapt this technique to stone. F. W. Deichmann has shown that capitals of the new style were exported from Constantinople to many important places in the empire. In Bawit they had not been able to supply themselves from the original source, yet they achieved a good artistic imitation.



a) The Egyptians with Pharaoh (second horseman from the left); below (from right to left) the young men in the fiery furnace, the sawing asunder of the Prophet Isaiah and Jonas' ship;



b) The heavenly Jerusalem in the form of a palace; below left, Adam and Eve, and right, Noah's Ark and the dove;



c) Moses and the head of the column of Israelites, led by Jethro; below (from right to left) the Good Shepherd and his flock and Thecla at the stake; below that, Abraham's sacrifice, the Wise Virgins and Noah's dove.









While the influence of Constantinople on the architectural decoration can be clearly felt, the wooden carving from Bawit can also probably be connected with the same source. Its artistic form is unique inside Egypt. It is much more difficult to prove such an influence, inasmuch as we know very little of carving from Constantinople in consequence of the iconoclasm of the eighth and ninth centuries and during the first Turkish period. We have mentioned, in passing, the beam, now in Berlin, showing Daniel in the lions' den. *Plate 60* It is true that the proportions and balance are not satisfactory here. But the almost free-standing relief with its definite feeling for form and its carefully worked details is not in accordance with either late provincial Greek or Coptic sculpture. It is true there is very little variation in the folds in the lower part of the doubly belted tunic, but they are very reminiscent in their form of late Hellenistic motifs. The decoration on the oriental-style trousers is well carried out, and the poses of the two lions are well differentiated. The classical decoration of the framework, too, is very clearly and carefully carried out. Certainly the carver was no great artist, but he was an above average craftsman who had been well trained. There is much in his work that is reminiscent of sixth-century ivory carvings from Constantinople, so we must assume that he knew works of this kind and had attempted to copy them. He too had felt something of the new movement in the arts that characterized the Justinian period and led to this epoch being termed 'the Justinian renaissance'.

This influence from Constantinople was not able to spread far in Egypt; the time that remained was too short; and the gulf dividing the Greeks and the Copts had become much too deep. We find other examples in sculpture only incidentally. We might mention in this connection the capital of a pilaster from a monastery situated near the Red Sea, *Plate 18* which cannot be more closely identified, and which today is one of the treasures of the Ikonenmuseum in Recklinghausen. The bust of an emperor carved on it is entirely in the manner of the art of Constantinople in the late sixth century. We might also include the pilaster, provenance unknown, now in Berlin, on which the rows of acanthus that grow *Plate 28* from the two-handled vase are equally in the manner of Justinian decoration in Constantinople, together with the other pilaster, also there, which probably comes from *Plate 27* Bawit. Except for this evidence, mostly from monasteries, there is little else.

But what has been already mentioned is sufficient to show us clearly that the early Byzantine also played a part in late antique art in Egypt. There could have been a common ground here where the ending of provincial Greek art and the beginning of Coptic art, might have combined to find a common mode of expression. The art of Constantinople had already, at least in its decorative work, risen far above the antique. And it contained many characteristics which were very close to those of the two principle components of the Egyptian late antique in the sixth century. But nothing came of it. The enmity between peoples and religions prevented it and the history of the country advanced beyond it.



## THE BEGINNINGS OF COPTIC SCULPTURE

It has already become quite clear in the observation of free-standing sculpture, such as funerary stelae, that next to the sculpture influenced by the provincial Greek and early Byzantine, there is a form of sculpture which is Coptic in the narrower meaning of the word. Not many examples exist, apart from the numerous Upper Egyptian funerary stelae, but some more can be added to these.

*Plate 8* A certain link with the ancient Egyptian can be seen in the statuette in Recklinghausen; it shows in the idol-like stiff pose, which is almost reminiscent of style of 3000 B.C. Still more marked is the continuation of ancient Egyptian tradition in funerary stelae of the

*Plate 75* type from Kom Abu Billu with standing worshippers. A small relief can be connected with this, not because it is worked in sunk relief (which indeed by no means predominates at Kom Abu Billu), but because of the way the figures are represented. This relief, today in Recklinghausen, almost certainly shows the Ascension in a very archaic manner. A very

*Plate 49* old and primitive interpretation of this event grew up in the ancient Church on account of the words of Christ to the repentant thief, 'Today shalt thou be with me in Paradise', according to which Christ was taken up immediately from the Cross into Heaven — otherwise what He said to the thief could not have been true. There were also circles in the early Church which considered Christ to be of the same substance as the angels (in the Old Testament these are also sometimes described as the sons of God), though ranking above them. On the relief from Recklinghausen we see two angels touching with their hands a head which is behind the centre of one of three crosses; the face of the head is exactly like those of the angels. The gesture of the angels is known in this form in certain Syrian works, and otherwise only in a single example in the art of the early Church, that is, in an Ascension from the wooden door of Santa Sabina in Rome, of about 430. Taking all this together, we might well suppose that our relief is intended to represent the raising of Christ from the Cross into heaven (the original text of the New Testament speaks only of the taking up, not the Ascension). It is clear how unfamiliar this theme is still to the artist, and how he attempts to render it in a way that is not reminiscent of the pagan prototypes of the ascension of heroes and emperors. Something new, very restrained and only comprehensible to the initiated has been achieved here, created from the theological conceptions of the growing Church, which by the time this relief was carved had in fact already become a little antiquated. This appears in forms which quite clearly descend from ancient Egyptian tradition: the angels, up to the hips, are represented in pure profile and the upper half of the body is completely front view; the folds of their robes are somewhat coarser, but clearly in the same manner, as those from Kom Abu Billu, and the peculiar indistinct outline of the eyes also has its prototype, there. The relief is among the oldest pieces of evidence of Christian Coptic art (its resemblance to the stelae from Kom Abu Billu suggests a date soon after the middle of the fourth century).

150 Its touching simplicity, its restrained representation of the divine event, the extreme way



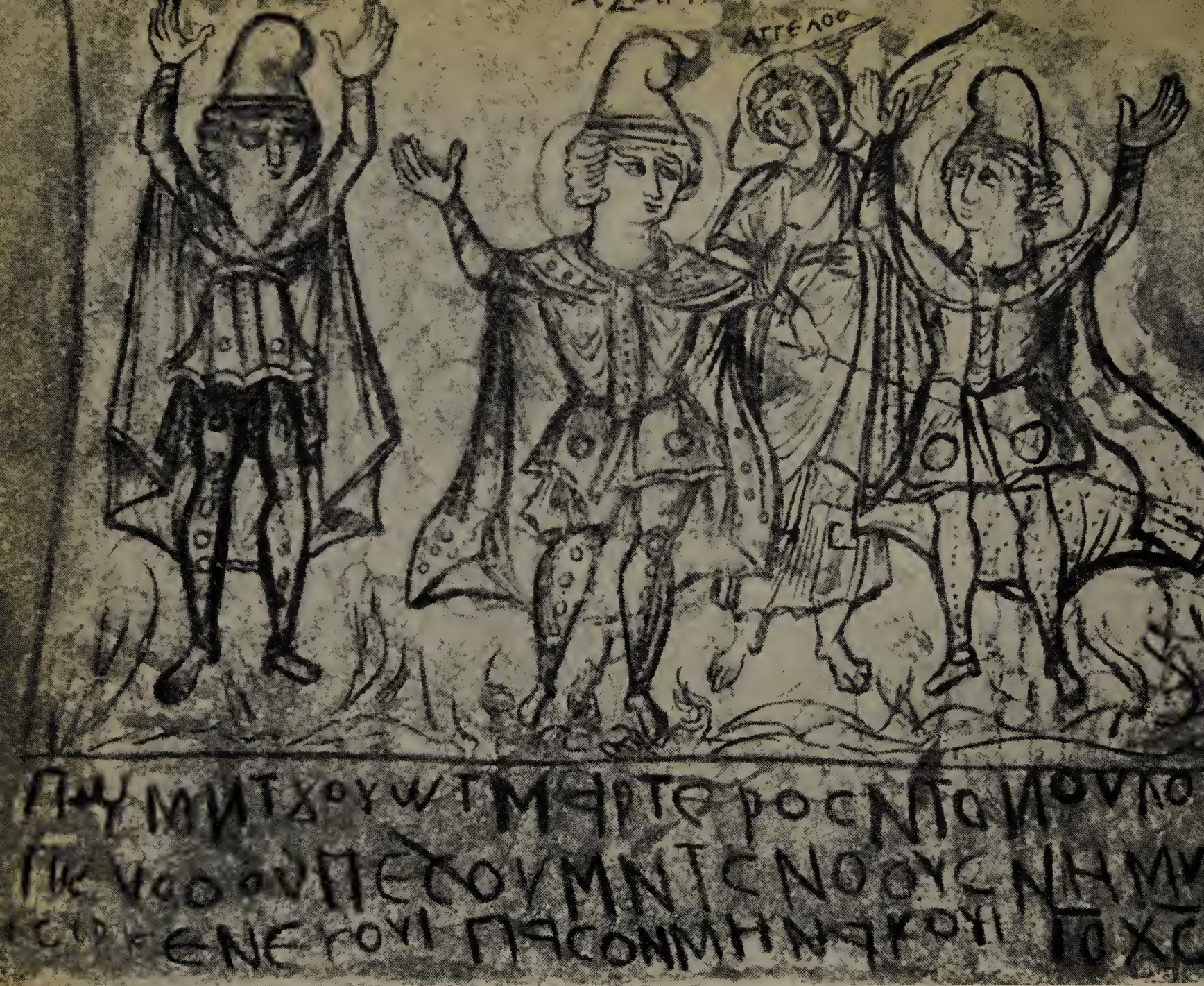


99 The Ascension of Christ, with, in the lower part, Mary praying between Apostles. Apse painting from Bawit



100 The Ascension of Christ with Mary nursing her Child. Apse painting from Bawit





101 The young men in the fiery furnace. Wall-painting from Wadi Sarga



the forms are simplified in the manner of folk art and the awkward placing of the wings, which appear instead of one of the arms, are very valuable indications of the beginnings of Christian Coptic art, which is still connected with the enduring elements of ancient Egyptian tradition.

From quite another point of view one can include here a relief, now in Cairo, which has already been very well described by M. Cramer. A woman in a richly decorated robe, with a high (Phrygian) cap on her curly hair, sits in a chair and bathes a child in a chalice-shaped vessel that looks like a medieval font. An enormous comb hangs above it. Beside the vessel a little chest stands on the floor; on the right of this there is a second woman, similarly dressed, standing facing to the front, taking no part in what is happening; she holds in her right hand, by a rounded handle, a little box or lantern or something similar, and in her raised left hand, a wreath. Above her right arm hangs a jar on a stand, and wherever there is room on the background, rosettes and stars are strewn. There is no attempt at perspective. The upper rim of the vessel appears to be raised up like a handle, in the manner in which the view from above was mostly depicted in the late antique, while elsewhere a purely frontal view is shown. The relative sizes of the objects are completely ignored, as can be seen by the size of the comb. The necessary toilet articles are simply strewn about the background without any attempt to relate them to each other. The relief is two-planed, all the patterns are carved from the surface downwards. A marked *horror vacui* appears in the indiscriminate and meaningless flowers in the background. M. Cramer has indicated the origins of the individual features of this relief: the representation of the seated woman and her chair conforms to ancient Egyptian tradition, as does the curly hair (according to M. Cramer, a wig) of the lady and the child. On the other hand, the Phrygian cap is an unmistakably Asiatic detail, which, however, is sometimes to be seen in the textiles of late antique Egypt. The form of the basin and the jar is Hellenistic, as is the excellently worked decoration of the border, a form of Greek key pattern with an arrangement of rosettes. Quite rightly M. Cramer has put forward this relief as a typical product of the mixed style, which she regards as characteristic of Coptic art in general, and also of those works which we have picked out as provincial Greek. But with equal correctness she adds, in summing up, that the relief, in spite of all Hellenistic accretions, appears Egyptian and therefore it seems to be the ancient Egyptian element which makes early Coptic art what it is. Certainly this relief could not be taken for an ancient Egyptian one, and can hardly be compared with one because it appears much too much like folk art in style, and also the foreign influences and borrowings are much too strong. But nevertheless, no one, looking at this work, would ever take it for Greek, not even for provincial Greek from the furthest and wildest hinterlands. The general impression is in fact Egyptian.

Plate 92

Crosses are attached to the cap of the woman bathing the child, and to the comb. This shows that the representation has a Christian origin and also a Christian significance. In this case the scene certainly shows the bathing of the new-born Christ, as is told in the



apocryphal stories of His childhood, where, moreover, there are also references to two women who acted as midwives. M. Cramer is again right in calling attention to the remarkable fact that this bathing of the Christ child hardly appears elsewhere in Monophysite circles in Egypt, whereas it is very common in Byzantine art. However, when for this reason she becomes doubtful about the meaning of this scene, it is impossible to agree with her. The question of the date of the relief, which is not touched on by Cramer, is decisive. The style of the relief, which is still strongly Egyptian, suggests that the piece cannot be very late. The apocryphal stories of the childhood of Christ are very old, in part they go back to the latter part of the second century. The iconographical model, the scene representing the bath of the new-born Dionysos, is equally old; it appears on a

Plate 107 painted curtain from Antinoe, now in the Louvre. In this the bath is very similarly represented, even the manner of depicting perspective is repeated there, if in not quite so extreme a form. Above all, however, the relief resembles Egyptian works of the early Roman imperial period, especially the funerary stelae portraying Isis. We may date it, therefore, to about the same period as the relief of the raising of Christ in Recklinghausen. At that time, however, the Monophysite question was not yet acute, and the controversies dealt mostly with the relationship of Christ to God the Father. On religious historical grounds, therefore, there is no reason why this scene should not be interpreted as the bathing of the new-born Christ. However, it is impossible to say whether the theme was Christian from the beginning or whether it was made so by the addition of crosses to a picture originally pagan (according to Cramer, perhaps Mithraic). Certainly, the Egyptian appearance of the relief makes it unlikely it was of heathen origin as we have never heard of a Dionysos or Mithras cult among the Coptic population; the Greeks were the supporters of these foreign cults. It is therefore more likely that the relief is an original Christian conception. The upper part has been cut off in a rather regular curve, which shows that the relief was put to a new use when the theme was no longer considered suitable, and the picture side turned inward. Originally it must have continued to the right beyond the simple strip of the border, as the key pattern shows. Probably, therefore, there was another scene connected with one of the stories of the childhood of Christ. Thus this relief is further evidence of the early period of Christian Coptic art, in its theme not as original as the portrayal of the raising of Christ, being adapted from a pagan prototype by the addition of crosses, but nevertheless, expressive of the creative fervour of the Egyptian converts.

Plate 54 The relief of David, which we contrasted with the Orpheus in our imaginary museum, belongs to approximately the same style and period.

Plates 4, 86 Otherwise what we have so far found to be Coptic inclines more strongly towards provincial Greek art, or else is purely decorative, that is, definitely folk art. From the first

Plate 6 group we have seen the funerary stelae of Rhodia and Apa Schenoute, and the icon-like

Plate 44 *Maria lactans* from the Faiyum also belongs here. We might also possibly include with

154 them the strange relief in Recklinghausen in which two mermaids are made Christian



by the addition of crosses. Whether they are meant to represent nereids or sirens is not quite clear. Nereids were occasionally represented in poetry with fish-tails (Horace), but never in art; sirens in the classical period are always depicted as bird-women, but a late antique anonymous writing (*De Monstris et belluis* I, 8, probably sixth century) describes them as we see them in our relief, and as they were shown in medieval art. That they are sirens is more probable because it is particularly in Egypt that nereids are given purely human form, so that such an exception to the rule seems hardly possible. The addition of crosses to make the relief Christian might perhaps mean that the power of seductive song, condemned as devilish by Alexandrian theologians (for example, Clement), must now serve to praise the only true God. It may be that the idea is defensive (apotropaic) — the picture of the sirens being made Christian and serving to make these evil and seductive creatures harmless (picture magic). The relief can be dated to the early fifth century.

Above all, however, we must mention here the fragment showing a praying saint Plate 62 (formerly in the Kelekian Collection, now in Dumbarton Oaks). The form of Greek key pattern with inset rosettes which surrounds it is reminiscent of the relief showing the bathing of the Christ-child, in Cairo, but is much more coarsely and simply worked. On the other hand, what remains of the figure of the worshipper in its narrow niche is of great impressiveness and well carried out. The saint wears a monk's cowl and over his left shoulder there hangs a band, apparently a *stola*. The well-shaped face, with large eyes is framed by short hair and a long beard. The hair and beard are delicately rendered, compared with what we have seen so far, and the remains of colouring are preserved. Without any doubt we have here the picture of a monk who was honoured as a saint and who was also a priest. He stands worshipping in the same position as so many other figures on funerary stelae. The relief is perhaps a fragment of a gravestone which once covered the last resting place of the saint. Otherwise it may have been an ecclesiastical picture, like a stone icon in relief, such as we know otherwise only from the Byzantine middle period. The date is much disputed. D. R. Kelekian dates it to the fifth century, while J. S. Thatcher considers it to be of the sixth to seventh century. In favour of the earlier date is its great resemblance to provincial Greek art, for the later date one would have to assume that the great artistic renaissance of the sixth century in the eastern Church had had some influence here, as it had done so deeply in monasteries such as Bawit. The later date might be preferable in view of what is shown by the earlier examples of Coptic sculpture which are influenced by the provincial Greek. The difference between this and the stele of Apa Schenoute is very great. It is probable that the great self-confidence Plate 86 of the Coptic Church, after the long reign of pure Monophysitism in Egypt, may be seen as the spiritual background of this excellent work.

By comparison, the wooden icons in relief are much simpler in form and also of poorer workmanship. We choose from among them an example from the Brooklyn Museum. Plate 93 Undoubtedly it comes from the same artistic background as the relief of the praying saint, which we have just described. The quality of the work, however, is very much



poorer and the human figures show very clear characteristics of folk art in their radical simplification of detail.

*Plate 96* This radical simplification is yet more striking on a wooden lintel from the Faiyum, now in Recklinghausen. It represents the entry of Christ into Jerusalem in which the apostles who follow Him and the multitudes greeting Him are depicted in exactly the same way, as far as type and dress are concerned, and can only be distinguished by the staffs which the apostles hold. The scene, common in Christian art since the fourth century, has *Plate 97* completely lost any element of narrative. Nowhere else have the details of the stories, as, for example, how men climbed into the trees in order to break branches from them (*Matt.* 21, 8) been omitted in this way. It is shown in other examples, including those from the Greek Christian community in Egypt, how clothes were strewn under the hooves of the ass, but here they are leaves. Any kind of grouping or composition is most carefully avoided. The mounted Christ takes the middle of the picture, and the other figures are arranged in regular rows all posed frontally. Only the man immediately before Christ is slightly turned towards Him, though he, too, looks straight out of the picture. Christ's *Plate 98* Entry into Jerusalem, a vivid, exciting event, which even in the shortest description can be felt to be joyous, has here become a rigid row of figures which stare with their great eyes out of the picture like strange idols. This remarkable style which divests a historical event of all its dynamic force can be seen again, this time in painting, in a picture of the Children of Israel crossing the Red Sea. This hieratic arrangement of figures conforms completely to this style in which not the smallest detail deviates from a numinous solemnity. Garments and figures are all reduced to the simplest forms, utterly remote from any kind of naturalism; the faces are stiff as masks, with large wedge-shaped noses and staring round eyes. Whether the bolster-like shape which surrounds the head is meant to be hair or a hood cannot be decided. There is no question here of any imitation of antique or late antique style. This is an example rather of a weighty and completely original archaism which knows how to make a religious impression and create idols of mysterious power which appear to lead us back to the very beginnings of human portraiture. This work is an example of Coptic folk art which has completely turned away from the antique and thus cannot be dated by its relationship to it.

*Plate 95* In this connection may be mentioned a number of ivory pyxes from amongst which a piece in the Bonn Rheinisches Landesmuseum can be taken as an example. According to the recently expressed opinion of W. F. Volbach, these are Egyptian works; they all show miracles, at the most two on each example in which Christ is always depicted in the same manner, with a cruciform sceptre in His left hand, and His right stretched out in blessing. He is always accompanied by some bearded apostles, one of whom at least holds a book in his left hand. The background is always covered with indistinct architectural detail, mostly arcades merely scratched in. The faces are very carelessly and roughly cut; the eyes are merely slits between two pads which represent the lids, and the mouths look just the same. The folds of the garments are consistently merely incised in a schematic



and parallel manner. Although artistically of poor quality, these pyxes nevertheless show evidence of the iconographical influence of the imperial capital, where art had reached a peak of perfection under Justinian, the style of which they attempt to copy with little success. A very remote relationship with the most magnificent example of the ivory sculpture of the Justinian period, the Chair of the Archbishop Maximian in Ravenna, probably a work from Constantinople of about the sixth century, helps us to date these pyxes; they could not have been made before the second half of that century. They can hardly have come from Alexandria because they have little or no resemblance to work that we know of from there. Pyxes of this type have been acquired in Medinet el-Faiyum and also found in Fustat (Old Cairo). Volbach suggests that there was a workshop in the region of Assiut or Fustat, and considers them to be related to provincial Greek wood carving. I think they are more likely to be products of Coptic monasteries, doubtless for liturgical use (for storing of consecrated bread or bearing it to the altar). They show how early Byzantine influences also appeared in the minor arts, weak and watered down, but nevertheless unmistakable.

A relief which has already been briefly mentioned, showing the martyrdom of St Thecla, now in the Brooklyn Museum, shows an independent artistic spirit which is still further removed from the provincial Greek. We have already remarked on the deep religious feeling which created this work, which is one of the oldest surviving representations of martyrdom. The style which the artist has chosen is completely unclassical and also widely different from what we know of the provincial Greek. With its *horror vacui*, the decorative forms of the trees, the heraldic pose of the beasts and the deep contrast between light and shade, it belongs to the realm of folk art. The decorative background is combined with an impressive simplicity in the way the figures are represented. But although this may well be the work of a Copt, we cannot even guess at the date. The veneration for St Thecla appears to have spread fairly early in the Nile Valley, certainly by the fifth century (originally she was a town saint of Seleucia), therefore the relief could have been made about this period. More important than this unanswerable question is the astonishing force of this simple work, which expresses something of the inflexible spirit of Coptic monasticism in the Monophysite time.

Plate 52

Similarly isolated within the late antique art in the Nile Valley — although the Thecla relief does indeed have a companion piece of the same type in the Brooklyn Museum — is the earthenware dish with the picture of Christ Triumphant, in Recklinghausen. Though it is unfortunately much obliterated, it is yet possible to recognize the figure of the youthful Christ with a richly decorated cross in His hand (*crux gemmata*), impressed upon the earthenware with the simplest technique. Everything is rendered in the simplest lines, not unskillfully, but as stiffly as an icon, except for the slight bending of the head, with its two over-large eyes. The Coptic urge for filling in space is shown in the completely unrelated animals and small ornaments around the figure. The Christ-type chosen here is not genuinely Coptic; it occurs more commonly in Ravenna in the sixth century (mosaic

Plate 94



from San Michele in Affricisco, now in Berlin). But the marked simplification of the forms and the hieratically austere character of the picture is without doubt Coptic work.

*Plate 15* A much stronger impression of the essence of Coptic art comes from the Berlin relief showing Christ mounted. We have already analysed it from the stylistic point of view. This relief from Der Amba Schenoute shows most clearly, perhaps, how the Coptic world, free from both ancient Egyptian and provincial Greek influences, created its own art. This decidedly medieval style originates in a Coptic monastery, being perhaps the classic example of the new folk art turning away from the hated world of the Greeks, and drawing strength from its own native sources. As we saw, the theme was brought in from outside Egypt; and it had probably been first adopted by the Greeks in the Nile Valley. But it was the Copts who first freed it from its pre-Christian elements, and turned it into something quite new. In spite of the primitiveness, with which one would like to credit the original kind of archaism seen in this sculpture, there is in fact about the picture a glimmer of real naïvety, of concentrated and convincing, if, indeed, also very strange piety, which shows something of the quality of the true religious painting of a growing culture.

*Plate 48* This completely characteristic style was not often achieved again. One might mention in this connection the relief from an ornamental frieze, with angels worshipping the Cross, which also comes from a monastery. But it still shows in the faces an attempt at provincial Greek style, even though the forms are otherwise very strict and harsh. This *Plate 17* strongly schematic simplification of a foreign prototype is also found in the little mould in the Brooklyn Museum, which reduces a Palestinian theme of the Crucifixion to very childish little matchstick figures.

*Plate 22* The Berlin statuette of a lion is nearer to the mounted Christ in its radical departure from naturalism, its completely cubist form, and its separation from its prototype. And *Plate 23* the lion mask on the vase-stand from Saqqara, now in Cairo, is an even more extreme example. The works which we have previously mentioned have all attempted to take over forms which had come down from the past or from abroad, and embody it in their own style. These, however, show the independence of the Coptic artistic spirit when it had given up attempting to assimilate what was outside it and went its own way. Works of this kind are really unmistakable and are no longer late antique in the sense of being provincial degenerations of the rich, rapidly changing imperial art; they are much more a new beginning, forward-looking and audacious, like everything young, a break-through into a new world of art. If we place beside this new archaic style a really degenerate *Plate 11* work, like the Berlin lion hunt, the difference is clear without commentary. On the one hand is a peasant product, weak and artistically impoverished, hardly to be dignified by the name of folk art, and on the other, the attempt at an individual and new style, determined on throwing tradition overboard.

*158* In order to underline the newness of Coptic art after it had found its own rules, pieces of architectural sculpture, like the capital from Saqqara with the rows of vines, now in



Cairo, or the two-zoned capital from Der Mawas, now in Recklinghausen can be mentioned. Plates 31, 32  
 They are of particular importance to us here, because they, together with the little mould in the Brooklyn Museum, give us a point from which we can date this breakthrough of Coptic art: we cannot imagine dating these works before the sixth century. Plate 17  
 It was not until the self-confidence of the Copts had been restored by the successful issue of the Monophysite struggle, and after they had recovered from the oppression of almost a thousand years of foreign rule, that they could find ground for this new beginning. And what can to a certain extent be dated, also points to this time. The Islamic conquest did not put an end to the new development, but it completely isolated it from the rest of the Christian world, so far as it had not fallen under the sign of the crescent. For all that, Coptic art although at that time still so young, was able to have an influence far and wide, in Ethiopia as well as Ireland, to name two extremes.

Let us examine once more the harsh verdict which C. M. Kaufmann gave, when challenged by J. Strzygowski, and consider for a moment whether it really applies to Coptic-Christian art. Iconographically, much of what we have seen is in no way peculiar to it: the angels worshipping the Cross, the praying saint and the figures of saints in the wooden icons, all go back to early Christian prototypes, which in their turn had ancient predecessors; the *Christus victor* of the earthenware bowl, the miracles of the Bonn Pyxes and the Crucifixion on the mould in the Brooklyn Museum, are modelled on early Byzantine work; the *Maria lactans* and the mounted Christ have a provincial Graeco-Egyptian model, which, through the mounted saints of Achmim, extend far back into the east; finally, the bathing of the new-born Christ, and David playing his lyre are based on Hellenistic originals. To be fair, one should not call this reliance of the Copts on earlier works artistic dependence, since early Christian art took over and gave a new interpretation to and assimilated themes in the same way. The Copts even christened, as it were, older pagan works quite simply by adding to the Christianized *ankh*, the letters A and Ω, as we see on the painting on the top of a Roman gravestone. But besides these we find such individual and independent works as the Ascension of Christ, the martyrdom of St Thecla, and the sirens decorated with crosses. Where there was no suitable pagan or non-religious model to follow, Christian Coptic art very early on tried to find appropriate images to spread the message. This does not fit in with the theory that Christendom took no pleasure in figure sculpture here either. On the contrary, it was through Christianity that the Coptic world first achieved its own individual figure sculpture. When Strzygowski and Kaufmann expressed their opinion, most of the examples that we have mentioned here were not known. What was already known, such as, for example, the mounted Christ from Der Amba Schenoute, was considered to be the product of an artistic conception orientated upon the classical antique. Because Coptic works were grouped together with the obstinately heathen provincial Greek work, of which there was far more, they were naturally swamped, and this contributed substantially to this unjust verdict. Today we not only know more examples than those upon which this harsh

Plate 71



judgement was based, and differentiate much more sharply between Greek and Coptic, even though much of the Greek work, too, may appear provincial and of poor artistic quality, but we have learnt from the artistic development of our own time, that naturalism and classicism are not the highest forms of artistic development. We can now sense the emptiness of many of the artistic schools which were still much admired at the turn of the century, and this includes the classical antique. Equally we have acquired a feeling for the value of the primitive, archaistic and even child-like in art. Thus a way has opened to us to make a fairer judgement, which does not measure the Copts by the standards of the antique, which are essentially foreign to them. We can now recognize Coptic attempts at forming their own style as something genuinely bold and new. Much as it may disappoint or repel scholars of the classical antique, we are no longer going to express ourselves in terms of a decadent theory. We must value at its true worth the beginnings of a genuine folk art which even showed an independent development in several different places (Ahnas-Herakleopolis Magna). We must see the historically necessary tragedy of the slow choking of Greek culture in the settlements of the Nile Valley, not as a decline into insignificance of the Greek, but a welling up of the Coptic world. It is the harsh answer of history to the racial and cultural policy of Rome in Egypt. The decay of provincial Greek influence meant the rise of Coptic culture.

## PAINTING

The surviving examples of painting, especially of wall-paintings, are much fewer in number than those of sculpture. At the height of the medieval period Arab writers describe magnificent paintings; those of the shrine of St Menas, for example, were especially famed. But little survives. S. Der Nersessian has confirmed this fact briefly and strikingly: 'With the growth of monasticism, churches sprang up in the most remote oases, but hardly any of these buildings have survived. Built mostly in brick, and often with little care, they have not been able to withstand the effects of time and man. The Arab historian Al-Makrizi describes in considerable detail the destruction of churches and monasteries in the fourteenth century. There had also been severe persecutions earlier, causing great damage and, what was equally fatal, resulting in the apostasy of large numbers; for instance, after the persecution of AD 743, twenty-four thousand Christians are said to have embraced the Moslem faith. The Christian communities, reduced in numbers and impoverished, could no longer adequately care for their churches, and what had escaped actual destruction fell into decay through neglect.' Only the Egyptian sand has preserved for us much that has been excavated by archaeologists. However, to quote S. Der Nersessian again: 'But even in important centres like Bawit in Upper Egypt or Saqqara in Lower Egypt, the large churches are completely destroyed and the paintings which covered their walls are lost forever. Only some of the smaller chapels have retained





VII The Ascension of Christ. Apse painting from the monastery of Bawit

their decoration, so that, at best, we know Coptic painting from the inferior examples.' We can therefore only get a rough picture of what once was found in abundance in the churches and monasteries. However, this picture is clear enough to let us recognize here, too, the dual nature of what is generally known as Coptic.

The paintings in the funerary chapel of El Bagawat in the Oasis of Kharga, an extensive necropolis, first opened up by W. de Bock, and comprehensively published by A. Fakhry, certainly belong to the fifth century. Among the chapels one is particularly striking. Fakhry calls it the 'Chapel of the Exodus', because the most distinctive of the themes represented here is that of the flight of the Children of Israel from Egypt. The background of the dome is uniformly white. At the summit of the dome there is a carelessly executed painting of a vine covered in grapes pecked at by birds. Then follows a small band of people who are beginning the Exodus from Egypt. In contrast with all that we already know of early Christian art, this event is remarkably undynamic in its presentation. The Israelites form a long row, led by Moses and Jethro, and then come, similarly as a long row, the pursuing Egyptians; above the first Egyptian riders stand the words 'Red Sea'. The groups of fleeing Israelites are charming in detail: some carry bundles, others

Plate VI



lead children by the hand, many ride on beasts of burden, and others lead them by the reins, but, except for the inscription, there is no reference to the catastrophe to Pharaoh's army, otherwise a popular subject on sarcophagi and mosaics. If the explanatory words did not stand above the vanguard of the pursuers, one would hardly grasp the idea that this is supposed to represent the wonderful deliverance of the chosen people, and the destruction of their enemies. Both lines of people come from and go to a great palace-like building, according to O. Wulff, the heavenly Jerusalem. The Exodus and the crossing of the Red Sea had been, since the earliest times, among the Old Testament paradigms of baptism. The Exodus signifies the leaving of this godless world, the crossing, the baptism, and the catastrophe to the army of Pharaoh, who was equated with the devil, the destruction of sin and the devils who ruled those who were not baptised. Both could be symbols of Christian death, since baptism and death were very closely connected in the old Christian world of ideas. An example of this was the widespread custom of being baptised on one's deathbed in order to go into eternal life purified from all sin.

This well-known Old Testament symbolism from the old Christian cemeteries of the ancient world fits well into the remainder of the pictures in the lower ring and the spandrels of the dome. We find here numerous single scenes: thus, under the stairway to the palace Adam and Eve prepare to leave Paradise, and behind them is the tree with the serpent. To the left are Daniel in the lions' den, then the three young men in the fiery furnace, the sawing asunder of Isaiah, the history of Jonas (with a Nile vessel as a ship), two indistinct small scenes, a shepherd with his flock, Thecla at the stake, the sacrifice of Abraham, the Wise Virgins, who advance towards the Temple, and Noah's Ark, again a Nile vessel. The subjects have much in common with those of the old Christian funerary art of the Roman Empire. But already the iconography of the motifs is characteristically Egyptian. Thus, the Nile vessels appear twice in the form already known to us from ancient Egyptian representations. In order to achieve the casket-like form of Noah's Ark required by the Bible text, the painter has simply placed two caskets in the boat. The *ankh*, too, appears several times, for example, in the central round arch of the Palace, which Wulff very plausibly describes as a picture of the heavenly Jerusalem. Many of the scenes are otherwise hardly verifiable: perhaps among them is the sawing asunder of the prophet Isaiah. Others again have additional details that are only found in Egypt: thus, for example, Sarah appears in the scene of Abraham's sacrifice. The great number of Old Testament scenes suggests that behind this certainly Christian painting (the Wise Virgins can only be presented in a Christian sense), there is a rich Jewish tradition. Considering the great Jewish colonies in the Nile Valley, that is not to be wondered at, and there is also the fact that Jewish philosophy and allegorical interpretation of the texts (Philo of Alexandria) as well as the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the so-called Septuagint, all originated here.

Wulff has rightly stressed the great value of this picture cycle, and has refused to derive it in any way from Roman originals. Apart from the problems of iconography

Plate VIc

Plate VIb



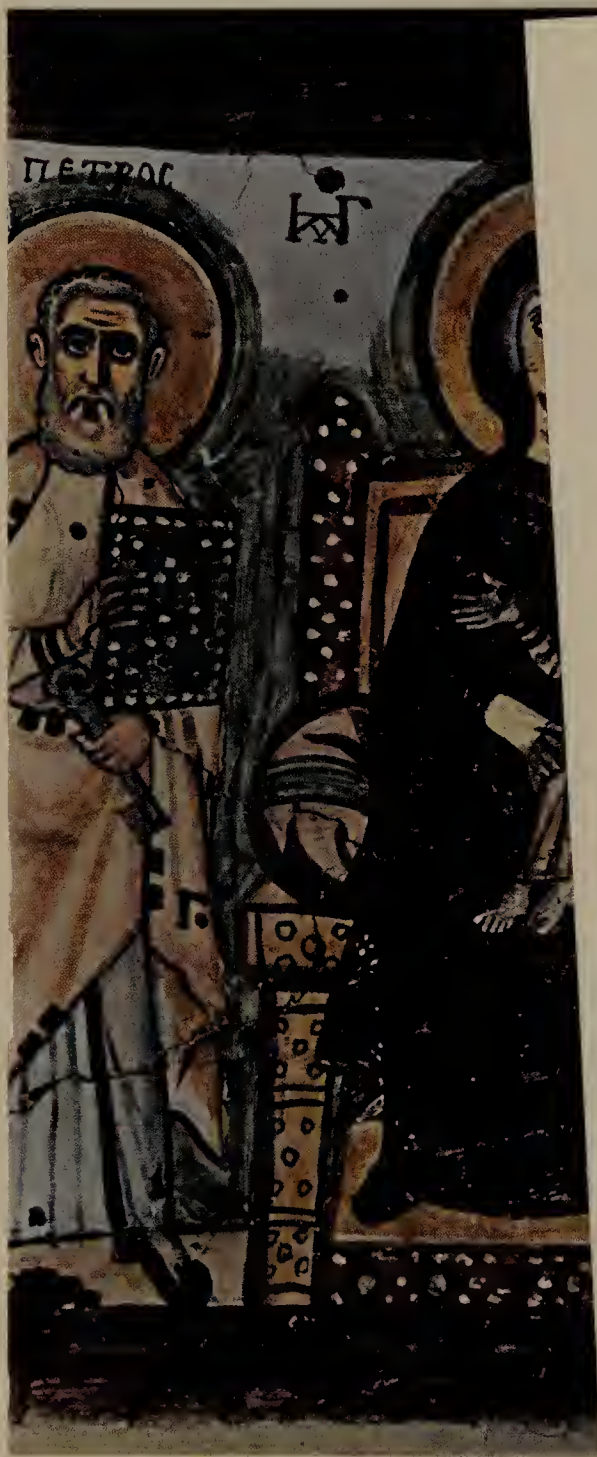
which this would pose, the quality of the painting forbids any such attempted derivation. The painter of this chapel, or whoever commissioned the work, had certainly an exceptional knowledge of the Old Testament, or had been advised by someone who had, but the painter's technical skill was very poor. He paints in different shades of red, without previous drawing. His figures are for the most part very badly formed; for example that of Eve! He can represent movement very well, but his animation is often carried to the point of caricature. His plants are decorative and quite flat as if they had been pressed. Similarly flat, lacking in modelling and two-dimensional are the figures, which are utterly unhellenistic. The hard emphasis of the outlines and the general impression of a sketch are very characteristic. 'In general this art is as naïve and inexperienced in difficult artistic problems as it is fresh and lively in the immediate rendering of the images'. (Wulff). The representation of the buildings, showing the two side views beside the front view, with no regard to perspective, is common in the late antique, and its completely flat effect fits in well with the two-dimensional nature of these pictures. Wulff calls the whole 'hinterland art run wild, full of fresh invention', and wonders whether it has freed itself from the influences of classical style. There is much truth in his opinion. We have here, quite obviously, a Copt who is daringly translating the iconographical possibilities of rich funerary art into a style with which he is familiar, like a child experimenting with a paint-brush. This painter knew nothing at all of the rules of classical painting, and also nothing of those of the late classical style, as is often apparent in the painting of the Roman catacombs where the influence of folk art is very much in evidence. He had his theme, which was certainly commissioned, he knew his Bible and he started to paint, without any claim to art and burdened with a lack of knowledge. By aesthetic standards of classical art, what he produced is wretched. But the directness of these painted stories in a place of death is moving and, in its way, magnificent. The term 'run wild' used by Wulff is surely not quite suitable; it assumes that it is a lowering from a higher art. It seems rather as if we have testimony here of men quite untouched by antique culture and art coming upon an exciting unexplored territory of painting and an expression of their piety in pictures. The child-like and primitive nature of this painting unequivocally confirms that we see a new beginning here. It is followed by similarly archaic and primitive paintings in the necropolis of Bawit and elsewhere, but they do not have the originality that delights the eye in the 'Chapel of the Exodus'.

*Plate VIb*

When we turn to the surviving paintings from the great monasteries in Bawit and Saqqara, the picture is completely different. Most of the remains in Bawit are painted friezes, with biblical and secular scenes, which do not easily fit into the iconographical or stylistic picture of early Byzantine art, and there are also numerous vaults of the so-called chapels. These were probably the private meditation places of the monks, who could certainly inherit their 'cells' as personal property. They were small houses, often with several rooms. The vaults were painted with devotional pictures, just as the cells of the monastery of San Marco in Florence were decorated by Fra Angelico. We continually



Plate VII find the same theme with slight variations: the Ascension of Christ, treated as a devotional work. The picture is in two parts, and the manner of representation has become stylized. Christ is enthroned in the dome of the vault, in a round aureole, in His left hand the open gospel and His right raised in greeting or blessing. The heavenly chariot of Ezekiel's vision (Ez. 10, 9 - 14) has become formal decoration. Beneath the aureole are the little wheels of the chariot, from which flames sometimes rise. The aureole is surrounded by elliptical shapes, striped, with eyes painted on them, and with the heads of the emblems



VIII Madonna enthroned.  
Detail from Pl. VII



of the four Evangelists. Two angels bowing reverently, medallions representing the sun and moon, and star-like flowers strewn on the background complete this picture. A broad band divides the dome from the lower part of the vault. In the lower part thus formed, Mary and the Apostles appear, mostly with two saints. Mary may stand in prayer in the middle of the area, but she is often enthroned, and is once shown suckling her divine Child. The Apostles are ranged in rows beside her, all in a similar position, supporting a book with the right hand upon the left arm. There is no relation between the upper and lower part of the picture. All the figures, except the angels in the upper part, are depicted entirely *en face*. The regular rows of Apostles show very clearly the hieratic and icon-like nature of the painting. One would hardly think that this was other than a typical ceremonial work if the iconographical prototype were not known. In the Codex of Rabulas, from the monastery of Zaqba in Mesopotamia, completed in the year 586 and now in the Biblioteca Laurentiana in Florence, there is a miniature that has preserved this prototype, the original source of which is probably the Church of the Ascension in Jerusalem. In this miniature, Christ stands in an oval aureole which rests upon the fiery chariot of Ezekiel; two angels greet Him with wreaths of victory and two others hold up the aureole above; beneath the chariot, Mary stands in prayer. Around her stand the Apostles who look up at the ascending Christ pointed out to them by two angels. Though here too the heavenly and earthly spheres are separated, they are closely connected by the gestures and looks of the figures. From this the painter or painters in Bawit have made a devotional picture divested of any dynamic quality. Above all, the introduction of the enthroned Madonna with the Christ child is so contrary to the original meaning of the picture, that one involuntarily asks whether it was still understood. It is in any case given a new meaning: the Ascension to heaven has become a picture of the Lord enthroned in heaven, in which the fiery chariot is merely a frame to the throne. The group of witnesses of the Ascension has become the court of the Queen of Heaven, which can be readily enlarged by representations of the saints. Thus the worshipper in his chapel was face to face with the holy Church, and the fact that Christ was twice represented reminded him of the Incarnation of the Son of God and the return of the Son of Man to His heavenly kingdom, from which He ruled His earthly church as the Lord of All (Pantocrator).

Plate 99

Plate 100

Plate VIII

These astonishingly static paintings show a completely different spirit from that of the primitive and fresh attempts in the chapel of El Bagawat described above. Though they can in no sense claim to be great art, nevertheless they show a definite understanding of proportion and of the natural flow of folds, and there is even a certain feeling for the human form, though this is rendered very schematically and often expressed in lines or patches of shading. Considerably more use is made of colour than in El Bagawat, and an attempt is made to vary the row of Apostles by the use of different colours for their mantles. Mary is clothed in dark purple and the Child in yellow, here representing gold. There are clear attempts to model the faces with greenish shadings, though these shadings

Plate VIII



certainly look more like a frame round the face, being quite regular and taking no account of the way the light falls upon them. An attempt is made to give individual portraits of the Apostles, showing Andrew as an old man with remarkable hair standing up like flames. Astonishingly, this style of representation of Andrew is found only in Ravenna, where it is more delicately carried out, so that the hair does not look like a crown of feathers. The longitudinal arch of the vault carries an inscription, interrupted by monograms of Christ, and crosses within a row of medallions, with unfortunately very much damaged heads of saints, which appear to be female. Between the medallions there are decorations formed of four hearts in a circle. The pillars and capitals are also painted.

From whence comes this style of painting? It has nothing in common with that of El Bagawat and it would be difficult to find Alexandrian origins for it. S. Der Nersessian assumes Syrian influences. She evidences the religious similarities between Syrians and Copts, who were both Monophysites. We know virtually nothing about Syrian wall-paintings from this period. This makes it difficult either to confirm or disprove this theory. But we do know that in the year 575 there was a break between the Coptic and Syrian Monophysite Churches, because the Copts refused to have a Syrian as their Patriarch, and enforced the consecration of a Copt. After this event there appears little likelihood of Syrian influence. The Copts isolated themselves from the year 575 on in order to maintain their Church unity.

We have already seen influences from Constantinople in the architectural carving of Bawit. Could that not be equally true of painting? We know hardly anything of Byzantine wall-painting in the sixth century, but there is certain evidence in Rome that could be mentioned here. In the year 528, in the catacomb of St Comadilla, a fresco of a woman named Turtura was painted, showing the enthroned Madonna in the same manner as in Bawit, between two saints who lead Turtura to Mary. In this fresco we meet not only the same *en face* type of hieratic devotional picture, with a lack of any relationship in the composition, but also, though the artistic quality is much higher, the same way of representing the figures, placing the folds, and shading the robes. A seventh-century fresco in the same catacomb, showing the Evangelist Luke, displays the same style, though it is somewhat harder and more linear. In my opinion it can hardly be doubted that in the paintings of Bawit we have an early Byzantine influence, which should be described as provincial Byzantine. In artistic quality the frescos of Bawit and those in the catacomb of Comadilla are as different as the work of a good journeyman and an experienced and artistically sensitive master, but they are of the same stylistic period. In confirmation of this theory of the early Byzantine character of this painting, the picture of Andrew with the flame-like hair can be evidenced. Andrew is the Apostle claimed by the patriarchate of Constantinople as the founder of its Christian community, for purely political reasons, not least in order to oppose the claims of Rome on behalf of Peter as the Apostle of the Rock, and Paul as the teacher of the people. For this reason the brother of Peter was selected, who (according to *John I* 40 - 42) was the first of the Apostles to go over from





IX SS Philip, Andrew and Peter. Detail from Pl. VII

John the Baptist to Jesus and drew his brother with him. The portrait of Andrew was first individualized in Constantinople, from whence his cult came to Ravenna, the western Roman capital. Its proper centre, however, was the eastern capital, and it is significant that judging by the representations of him at least, Andrew first began to be important in Ravenna when the western empire ceased to exist. So the cult of the Apostle in the sixth century is evidence of something like religious adherence to Constantinople. When we see Andrew standing beside his brother at the right hand of the Madonna in an iconographical form known to us from Ravenna, we can only think in terms of Byzantine influence.

The wall-paintings from the monastery of Jeremiah at Saqqara are closely related, though somewhat more linear in their execution. We have already seen two representations of the Galaktophorousa from here. Only one of them, turning her head lovingly to her Child, is on an artistically higher level than the paintings from Bawit, which suggests that a Byzantine might have painted it. The other, stiffly and majestically enthroned, shows very clearly in contrast, especially in the way in which the folds of the lower part of the garment are depicted, how much further abstract representation of the human form and the linear planed interpretation has progressed in comparison to Bawit. The cushion on the throne, with its palm-leaf-like decoration, hardly gives any impression of

Plate II

Plate 33



folds, which can still be seen quite clearly in Bawit. The proportions, too, are faulty, the heads too big and the legs too short. This indicates the date of the paintings of Bawit — the vault from Bawit illustrated here could be of the late sixth century, as well as the other Galaktophoroussa from Saqqara. The distance from the original style of painting has become greater and it is hardly possible to assume an immediate influence. It is more likely that these paintings derive from Bawit, or from works of the same style and the same period which have not survived. What is known to us of figures of the saints from Saqqara fits in well with this theory. Of particular significance are the much harder contours and the altogether decorative treatment of details such as eyes, hair, beards, and folds. Here it would be possible to speak of a certain Coptic influence in the painting, showing the origin of the work; an attempt is made to match the provincial Byzantine with something similar, but the principles of Coptic art so clearly to be seen in sculpture are submerged.

Plate X

We see another completely different kind of painting in a picture, now in the British Museum, from Wadi Sarga, south of Assiut in the Thebaid. It shows the three young men in the fiery furnace, and the angel holding back the flames with his staff. The three young men wear the so-called Persian costume, with cloaks and Phrygian caps, all richly decorated, and the angel appears in tunic and pallium. All four figures are drawn in flowing lines, and the poses are all different — a feat not easy to achieve since the three young men all stand in the position of prayer — and there is a real feeling of balance in the composition. The proportions are not correct: the young man on the left is particularly badly drawn, while the central man and the angel are the best executed. By not placing the figures on one level and by letting the cloaks and arms of the two young men partially obscure the angel, this painter has with very simple means created an imaginary picture space, and with turning heads and figures looking in various directions and other pictorial relationships has made this scene much livelier than the paintings from Bawit. Also certain details of the drawing such as the shading of the young men's legs and the feet of the angel, show that the painter knew something of the classical tradition of representation of human beings. We could hardly be mistaken if we saw in this style the only echo in wall-painting of Alexandrian art. This very sure way of drawing with brush strokes is reminiscent of the graffiti on the cross of Theodote. This painting is generally dated to the fifth-sixth century (most recently by M. Cramer); but to us the sixth appears more likely, considering the magnificent flowering of art in this age. The impetuous artistic development, in part a true renaissance, originating in Constantinople, must have influenced the capital of Egypt as it did all the great centres of art and culture in the eastern Empire. Our fresco is evidence that the antique tradition in painting had not quite died out in Egypt, although the execution, of a work in a remote provincial church, was not that of a great artist. This painting from Wadi Sarga has nothing to do with the early Byzantine as we see it in Bawit and Saqqara, or with the original Coptic as in El Bagawat; it is a genuine, though feeble, echo of the antique.

Plate 101

Plate 16



We find echoes of the antique tradition in another type of painting, that on painted caskets. We start with a fragment in Cairo showing the small head of a young woman, represented sparingly but nevertheless with a distinctly artistic effect. It is very softly modelled and the shading is successful; hard contours are avoided. The face is pretty, and very Greek, and is dominated by the large eyes. This charming picture, which shows the astonishing heights reached in Alexandrian crafts, is obviously related to the head of

Plate 102



X Saintly hermits and abbots. Wall-painting from the monastery of Saqqara

an angel on the fragment of a chest in Dumbarton Oaks. Though the angel's head is very much effaced — the nose and mouth are only shadows — one can nevertheless feel the presence of the living tradition of painting which produced the head of the woman. It is true that the execution is hastier and weaker, but it shows similar charm and refined elegance. The irregular frame, overlapped by the head jewel, and the decorative indication of the wings all show that this is a hasty work in no sense intended to be art, yet the skill of an experienced workshop gives the face something of the brilliance of antique painting. If the little head of the woman is of the time of Constantine the angel with the luxuriant

Plate 103



wreath and the imperial jewel upon it could be somewhat later. In spite of the basically similar technique and brushwork, certain simplifications appear: something in the depiction of the eye which does not point only to a poorer artist, but also to a somewhat later style. This type of angel is not known to us before the end of the fourth century, so that J. S. Thatcher's dating to the fifth century may well be correct.

The next development is shown by an unfortunately somewhat damaged casket in *Plate XII* Berlin, upon the lid of which a medallion with a picture of the youthful Christ with the inscription ΣΩΤΗΡ (Saviour) is fitted into the square. The same technique is used here, but fine shading is not employed in the drawing of the face which is rather sharp, sketchy, and has highly simplified outlines. The neck is foreshortened by the drawing of the halo

*Plate XI* and the robe. The same effect appears on the medallions on the sides of the casket, which are arranged in pairs and show the four archangels and SS Luke, Thomas, Faustus and Cosmas. Here the manner is still more schematic than that of the medallion of Christ, which is more carefully painted, and the surrounding decoration is carelessly daubed in. A certain hardening can be felt and the delicate imaginative style of the first two pieces has been lost. For iconographical reasons this casket can safely be dated to about the middle of the sixth century. At this time, therefore, there was still something left of the Alexandrian tradition in painting. But it is to the Greek Christian sphere, as the Greek inscription shows, that this casket belongs. It very probably served to bring the communion bread to the sick. Here too we observe, as so often before, what we have called the Coptic style: flatness, two-dimensionalism, reduction of form, and predominance of line.

XI Two saints and two archangels. Encaustic painting on a wooden casket







XII Christ. Encaustic painting on the lid of the casket shown on Pl. XI

The paintings that we have seen are carried out in encaustic technique: that is, they are wax paintings on wood. This technique was known in ancient Hellas, and is also to be seen in the mummy portraits from Antinoe and the Faiyum, those magnificent examples of antique painting from the cemeteries of the Egyptian Greeks.

Another technique, tempera, that is, with colours bound with egg yolk, is used for a panel, now in Berlin, that was either part of a large chest or the lid of a casket. Drilled holes and unpainted strips show that the panel was originally set in a framework. The partly damaged painting shows, on the left, a man with his hair done in the courtly style,

*Plate XIII*



and, on the right, a woman whose hair is parted in the middle and rolled on the ears. The difference between the two faces is astonishing; the visage of the man has strongly individual features, in spite of a certain abstract treatment, which shows, for example, in the shape of the chin, the strict symmetry of the shape of the face, and the broad outlines. By contrast the face of the woman is expressionless and impersonal, and beside that of the man quite inartistically harsh; compare only the two noses. But this has much to do with the loss of the upper layer of paint which is better preserved in the male portrait, and which adds the gleam of individuality to the purely graphic, thick-lined drawing. Thanks to the poor condition we can see the technique of the painting: firstly the drawing was carried out in simple, broad lines, which merely laid down the main outline; it was fashioned into a portrait by the application of several thin layers of tempera, until the lustre that lent the visage life was achieved. This male portrait shows us how finely this technique was perfected. In contrast to the Christ on the little casket in Berlin, we see here that much of the great Egyptian Hellenic tradition of painting was still alive. Yet the two works are of about the same date. The man's hair-style is that of the court at the time of Justinian, and the structure of the face is similar to the one on the famous icon of SS Sergius and Bacchus in Kiev. Therefore the date of the painting can be established as the middle of the sixth century. Possibly it originates from an Alexandrian workshop. It is certainly no great work of art, rather the work of a craftsman, but it shows that an unbroken tradition of painting still existed as late as this among the Greeks of the capital.

We find the same technique in the oldest Coptic icons. There must have been painted pictures of saints in the time of Constantine the Great, since his eulogist and historian, Bishop Eusebius of Caesarea, a convinced enemy of Church art which attempted more than the representation of biblical scenes or the martyrdom of saints, harshly refused the Emperor's sister, Constantia, a picture of Christ. There is further evidence to show that there were pictures in the modern sense, too, as well as wall-paintings in catacombs and churches, but nothing of them survives. The earliest icons in existence, Coptic ones among them, date from the late sixth century. They somewhat resemble mummy portraits, though only some of them show the head and shoulders usual in the mummy portraits. There are icons with full-length figures, and also spherical pictures (*tondi*).

Plate XIV The two best known Coptic icons come from the monastery of Apollo at Bawit. One, now in the Louvre, shows the full length figures of Christ and St Menas. The costume of the saint and the title of Apa before his name on the inscription show that this is not the famous national saint of the Egyptians, but an abbot revered as holy, probably of the monastery itself. The two figures stand against a background which is green to shoulder height, and above that, salmon pink. They are depicted strictly *en face*, related to each other only by the attitude of Christ, whose right hand lies on the shoulder of the abbot. Christ wears a purple robe, the folds of which are darkly shaded and high-lighted in pale blue. Menas has a white under-robe with red *clavi* beneath his brown tunic, also decorated with red *clavi*, and a light mantle draped above it. In contrast with Christ, who



carries a Testament magnificently ornamented with gold, precious stones and pearls, Menas holds only a modest little manuscript in his left hand. Christ's gesture very probably means not only protection (W. Felicetti-Liebenfels), but acceptance and presentation at the same time. He takes the abbot from among the saints and presents him to his people; in this there is a certain familiarity, which does not, however, dispel the austere solemnity of the presentation.

This tablet is typical of the style of the earliest icons; it is very closely connected, moreover, with all the early examples of this particular artistic form used by the eastern Church. Scenes of the history of God and mankind, as we see them on the walls of churches, are not represented here. Instead we see especially revered saints — even though veneration for them may not have extended beyond their own monasteries — shown by their haloes to be citizens of Christ's divine kingdom, and thus presented for veneration. In style these icons are very reminiscent of the late antique imperial portraits which were found in every official building of the empire. Just as the portrait of the emperor symbolized his presence in official business, the icon had a similar function. It is true that at this time the official theological teaching on icons had not yet been formulated, but it already existed in fact: the icon guaranteed the worshipper contact with the saint represented on it; as the picture transmitted his devotion to the saint, the power of the saint was transmitted to the worshipper. The icon was on the border between this and the other world and relates to both. In this way the presentation on the icon from Bawit is quite comprehensible: if Christ Himself showed Abbot Menas to the monks as a saint, veneration for him would be much increased, and at the same time the observer would be assured of the efficacy of worshipping this saint.

XIII Male and female portraits. Painting in tempera on wood





The style of this icon very much resembles the wall-paintings of Bawit. The extreme foreshortening of the lower part of the body is similar to that of the paintings in the vault of the Galaktophorousa. The clear outlining of figures and details relates easily to the vault paintings, as does the restrained colouring, the faces with the large, somewhat staring eyes, the way in which the folds are represented, and the attempt to give something of a feeling for natural form in the faces by the use of light and shade (to be seen particularly well in the face of Christ). There can be no doubt that the icon is of the same period, that is to say that it dates from the second half of the sixth century.

Though this tablet cannot be claimed to be an artistic masterpiece, nevertheless it is impressive and has a numinous feeling. The dignity of the figures, and, despite their artistic simplicity, their deep seriousness give the icon the nature of a true cult image, making great claims on the worshipping monk through his holy abbot but at the same time holding out to him confident hope, since it shows not only the image of a holy life, but also the future reward for it. The picture did not only demand, it also promised: he who would live in this holy way would be chosen by Christ to be among His saints.

*Frontis.*

The second icon, now in Berlin, is very different: it shows the Apa Abraham. The inscription states that Abraham was also a bishop, and therefore he wears the *stola* and holds a richly decorated Testament. Only his head and shoulders are shown, again strictly *en face*. Bishops were entitled to show their portraits to their communities, so that one of the first matters to be attended to by a newly consecrated bishop was the display of his picture. Therefore it cannot be said with certainty (even after examination of the original) that this picture of Apa Abraham was originally intended to be that of a saint, in spite of the halo, since this could have been added later after the death of Abraham. But, as W. Felicetti-Liebenfels has rightly emphasized, it could be that 'the limits of true religious veneration cannot be sharply drawn, all the more since many of these bishops were honoured almost as saints in their own lifetimes'. This was especially likely in the case of the abbot of a great monastery, who had absolute authority over his monks and demanded complete obedience from them.

The stern, almost embittered old man's visage looking out of this picture, and the frail hand, give a very different impression from that of the Menas of the icon in Paris and the picture is painted in a quite different style. 'The painting here does not portray the body in the traditional way, but uses abstraction and suppression of all but the essential features to serve the principles of a treatment of surfaces which raises a commonplace portrait to the grandeur of an icon. The outline of the planes conforms to the strict *en face* aspect of the old man, who holds, with a sheltering gesture, a Testament decorated with gold and precious stones, as a sign of his dignity as a bishop' (Felicetti-Liebenfels). The outline has become so strong that, together with the drawing of the nose, eyes, the wrinkles and the mouth, it forms a very symmetrically constructed linear pattern, which determines the style of the picture. The drawing completely dominates the icon; the colour is merely an addition. The design of the face, no longer a portrait,





XIV Christ and Saint Ménas. Icon from the monastery of Bawit







together with this graphic treatment, points to a conscious and deliberate abstract rendering of the human form, evidencing a sovereign contempt for the wordly accident of existence. Through this technique, which is also a deliberate style, the person represented becomes a type and is thus uplifted and made impersonal. The primitive religious feeling of this picture is even more pronounced than that of the icon of Menas, and it has far more of the quality of a solemn and sublime cult picture.

In style it has more in common with the paintings from Saqqara carried to an extreme, *Plate X* than with that shown here from Bawit. This icon shows the abstract treatment, the rendering of the bodies as flat surfaces, which we know in the mosaics of the early and middle seventh century. This picture of Apa Abraham, therefore, could be dated to the seventh century. It can scarcely be considered a sign of Coptic influence, but rather as a fortunately surviving classic example of a monkish asceticism in painting. The icon of Abraham follows the tradition of the mummy portraits from the Faiyum.



XV Elderly man. Mummy portrait  
from the Faiyum.  
Encaustic painting on wood



If we compare one of these portraits, for example that of a mature man from the Coptic Museum, a small masterpiece of portraiture, with our icon, the immense difference is perfectly clear. Although the man from the Faiyum is also shown full face, a very slight turning of the shoulders gives the impression that he has just turned his face to the painter. This face, with its slightly greying hair, is individualized to such a degree that one is almost inclined to read the character from it. It shows a human being in all his unique individuality. It shows a man as he was at the moment when the painter took up his brush in order to portray him. In contrast, the painter of the portrait of Abraham leaves out, with painstaking care, everything that could give personality to the face of the old man, leaving only the impression of the stern, ascetic, strong-willed and authoritative bishop and head of a monastery. The painter from the Faiyum created a portrait, as had been customary in this district for centuries, for burial purposes, and he obviously painted from a living model. (It is certain that the mummy portraits were made in the lifetime of the persons and set up in their houses before being put to their final use). In contrast the icon painter created a prototype which was to be used centuries later in the portrayal of holy monks in Byzantine art, and turned historical reality into a more than historical truth. A human being looks at us out of the Faiyum portrait, the icon shows us an ideal. The Faiyum portrait is a real and magnificent likeness, the icon of Abraham is, as a religious picture, no less real and no less magnificent in its abstract and ascetic strength. This should not be attributed merely to the great difference in style. The Faiyum portrait is one of the most beautiful examples of antique portrait painting extant, and it is a distinguished artistic achievement of striking realism. Nothing of this antique style is left in the icon, but this cannot be called degeneration. What the painter of the icon wished to express could not be done in the style of the Faiyum portrait. From the provincial early Byzantine style of his monastery he had distilled his own style, which is completely un-antique. The contrast exists not only because of the centuries between them but much more because the portrait and the icon are inspired by quite dissimilar artistic principles, which could be summed up in the words 'Reality and Idea'.

This icon shows the direction in which Coptic icon painting was going to develop, and how it would influence Ethiopian painting. Its own individuality does not suffer although it stems from these two remarkable Coptic Christian monasteries, Bawit and Saqqara, where the painting was influenced so much by the early Byzantine that it is considered to be a provincial off-shoot of Byzantine art. An old Berlin catalogue describes the icon as early medieval, and this is an exact description of the spirit that created it. It is a parallel in painting to the two ivory Madonnas from Alexandria, being a decisive and deliberate retreat from everything that antique art loved and valued. Let us compare the Abraham with the Christ of the Berlin casket and judge what is really new here. We have placed the Christ because it has been 'made Coptic' at the end of a line of development from which it has not, it is true, retained the skill in execution, but rather a certain involuntary beauty. The treatment of surfaces and lines is similar to that of the Apa Abraham. But

Plate XV

Plate XII









104 The god of the Nile. Woven medallion

105 Putti in a boat. Loop weaving





the hieratically strict *en face* aspect is lacking, as well as the solemn other-worldly dignity. In spite of its holy theme it is a degenerate work, while the Abraham icon is a new beginning. Christ is only to be known by the details, such as the halo and the inscription, otherwise He is no more than a handsome young man who makes little impression on us. But from the visage of Apa Abraham emanates something awe-inspiring and solemn, which would be effective even without the halo and Testament. Thus, shortly before the Arab invasion, a monk had been able to express the spirit of the saint in a picture, transforming prototypes he had adopted from far Constantinople. At this point Coptic painting could make its beginning, since with the Islamic invasion all connections with the Roman Empire were severed and the Coptic Church, having cut itself off from its Syrian comrades of the Monophysite creed, stood alone.

## TEXTILES

The so-called Coptic fabrics belong to the most widespread group of Egyptian handicrafts of the late antique period. Not only do great and small museums in the Old and New World possess collections, sometimes large, which include small fragments and whole robes, large wall-hangings and beautiful covers, but many private collections also contain astonishingly valuable objects, as well as institutions, such as the Textilingenieurschule in Krefeld, or industrial concerns like the Kanegafuchi Spinning Company, which have their own valuable collections. Unknown quantities still remain undiscovered on the Egyptian art market, and there has been no excavation of late antique Egyptian sites which has not yielded numerous finds of textiles.

It is simply because the Egyptian sand has great powers of preservation that we have so many examples of textiles; we have nothing like so many from any other province of the Roman Empire — everything that remains from other places is trifling compared with what we have from Egypt. The real reason for this may rather be found in the fact that the textile industry on the Nile was not only very old, but was also concentrated and supported by the State. For example, in the time of Augustus, Egypt was the sole centre for the mass production of linen garments, and one of the chief centres for the manufacture of silk. The capital, Alexandria, exported its textiles everywhere, thus, for instance, these Alexandrian exports have been found in the semi-Greek towns on the coast of the Black Sea. This export trade which, apart from some other manufactured goods, was mostly of linen, was one of the most important sources of income in Alexandrian commercial life. The concentration of certain manufactures in certain provinces, promoted by the state through taxes and commissions, made use of ancient Egyptian and Ptolemaic traditions to create what was virtually a monopoly of linen production in the Nile Valley, just as in Asia Minor and Gaul woollen materials were produced in great quantity.



In the time of the Emperor Septimius Severus (193 - 211), the Roman State resumed the practice of taking a proportion of the linen products from the manufacturers, and exporting it *en bloc* to Rome and the provinces. The custom had been in use under the Ptolemies and Augustus, but had fallen into abeyance. This part of the total production served the needs of the army. It was regarded as a compulsory sale and was paid for, and thus did not belong to the forced deliveries to the army, the so-called *annona militaris*. This did not change until the fourth century. In order to make sure of these deliveries, the weavers were formed into guilds. There had been weavers' guilds of this kind in Ptolemaic times, which 'primarily, if not exclusively, worked for the State' (M. Rostovtzeff). In the Roman period these guilds were responsible to the State for the deliveries, and naturally also for the tax payments of their members. We know of lists of such weavers from papyri, in which they are divided into groups of three: each of these groups had a fixed quantity of garments to deliver — not just the material, but the finished articles. Even the place to which the delivery was to be made was stated, that is to say, it went not to the government depot, but directly to the specified army detachment. Weavers could also be taken from their home-towns to Alexandria for forced labour for the State. Many complaints from weavers are recorded about too much work. We do not know how much time they had to work for themselves, but the amount of textiles found in the graves of private persons, etc., shows us that in spite of these energetic complaints they obviously had plenty of time to attend to the needs of the civil population and to make money for themselves. The manner in which the work was organized is shown in a papyrus which gives the minutes of a meeting of the local council of Oxyrhynchus, some time between the years 270 and 275. 'The question discussed was the delivery of linen garments to the temple. From the debate it can be gathered that the manufacture as well as the delivery was organized according to the old Ptolemaic system. The town collected the yarn from the peasants and delivered it to the weavers; if there was not sufficient raw material it was made up by purchases on the open market by the town. The weavers were obliged to work for the town for a fixed sum and deliver as much material as was ordered. The surplus was probably sold to merchants and private contractors.' (M. Rostovtzeff).

This short sketch of the significance of Egypt as a centre of the textile industry shows extremely well why it was that the material found there consists mainly of linen, into which, in one single manufacturing process, woollen decorations were worked, or on to which specially made woollen decorations were sewn. Pure woollen materials are decidedly rare; silk is more common, though certainly rare enough compared with linen. It suggests that these textiles are native examples from the surplus of the compulsory production, or made by the weavers' guilds in their own time. These weavers' guilds were generally situated in Greek towns, metropolises and villages, and their masters were for the most part 'Greeks'. The rich, often barbarically splendid decoration of the robes, which have been found both complete and in fragments, has given rise to the idea that this is a







108 Mythological figures. Clavi

109 Dancer with castanets and a youth. Wall-hanging





special Egyptian 'Coptic' fashion. This is undoubtedly a mistake. Considering the conditions of the textile manufacturers, as described above, the greater part of their production was ordered by the state for the army, and must have been subject to the prevailing fashions of the empire and dictated by them. It is therefore very probable that what was made for the use of the Greek towns in Egypt also followed the fashion of the empire, especially in the case of the surplus which came on to the free market. In fact, we know from other works of art that tunics with the same kind of rich, bright decoration as those found in Egypt, were worn generally in the late antique period. The mosaics of the Piazza Armerina in Sicily, probably once a villa belonging to the Emperor Maximianus Herculus (286 - 305, murdered 310), show how richly decorated even the everyday clothing of great men was, and that servants of this time were more gorgeously clad than Roman senators of the early empire — more gorgeously and at the same time more barbarically. This magnificence in clothing was particularly mentioned in the criticisms made by Christians about the introduction of oriental customs (for example by Lactantius at the court of Constantine in 317). There is some truth in this, but the emperors of the Tetrarchy, hated by the Church as persecutors of Christians, were not the only ones to blame for it. A much more probable reason for this development was that in the stormy third century in which many of the old Roman families were destroyed, the power in the empire was taken over by provincials, who had been for a long time culturally and politically outside the inner circles of the empire. Illyrians and Thracians, Syrians and Arabs, by culture and education half or completely barbarians, or representatives of an ancient culture intrinsically foreign to that of the classical antique, succeeded one another in swift succession on the imperial throne. The provincial nobility and former soldiers now formed the upper class. Leading positions in the empire were filled by people who had long been ruled by Rome, but were still rooted in their own traditions and had been only very superficially Hellenized or Romanized. The transference of power to provincials inevitably meant changes in art, fashion and taste.

The change in fashion is particularly striking. The tunic had at one time had stripes of varying breadth reaching from the shoulders to the hem (*clavi*), which served to show the social position of the wearer. Now its appearance was richer, more splendid and at the same time more barbaric (barbaric not in a derogatory sense, but rather designating a foreign, non-classical culture). In the mosaics of the Piazza Armerina we see large circles on the shoulders, richly woven or embroidered; the *clavi* reached to the hem of the robe only when worn by the higher ranks; servants, who now also wore them, had them only to the waist. No longer are there stripes in one colour, but brightly decorated trimmings, which end in a leaf or a similar motif; at the neck the *clavi* are linked to each other by similar trimmings; rich, brightly coloured cuffs encircle the wrists, and rectangular or round trimmings are placed on the garment about the middle of the thigh. Servants' tunics may be slit at the side, in which case they are trimmed at the seam and along the slit with broad, bright borders. The tunic, now hardly reaching to the knee and



cut very full, appears over-burdened with decoration. That this new fashion was not restricted to those in contact with the imperial court is shown by the only slightly later mosaics in Aquileia's oldest church, and the wall-paintings in the grave of a distinguished man and his wife at Silistra (Bulgaria), ancient Durostorum. The Egyptian finds can be added to these pictorial proofs, many more of which might be mentioned. Though many of them, including the majority of the complete garments, come from graves, there is no question of their being shrouds. This assumption could give a false impression, since shrouds could have been more richly decorated than everyday clothes. But many of the pieces have been mended in ancient times, thus they must have been long in use (though certainly not every mended garment was repaired in the lifetime of its wearer, but rather because of the widespread bad habit of piecing fragments together; which resulted in pieces of quite different origin being put together to form a 'mended' garment). Apart from garments, mostly tunics, but also occasionally gowns, cloaks, caps, gloves, stockings, etc., large and small covers and wall-hangings have also been found.

The main centres of textile finds, published up to now, are Achmim in Upper Egypt, the ancient Panopolis, Karanis in the Faiyum, Sheikh Abada and Der Abu Hennis in the neighbourhood of the ancient Antinoe, together with El Ashmunein on the opposite side of the Nile, formerly Hermopolis Magna; finds have also been made in monasteries like Saqqara and Bawit, on the sites of former bishoprics, such as Assiut, and in the capital Alexandria itself, though to a somewhat lesser extent. Very many of the pieces which are now in museums and collections all over the world are of unknown provenance. Many of the sites were once Greek metropolises or settlements. It is probable, therefore, that the pieces were made in the places in which they were found. Besides these, some might have been brought in the course of trade from other Egyptian towns to the actual or ostensible place where they were found, but the majority must have been of local manufacture, and some may well have been made at home for personal use. It can be assumed, at any rate for the majority of the later garments and fragments of garments, that the increasing impoverishment of the Greek population of Egypt and their repression by the Copts, had the result that great numbers of the Greek middle classes were not in a position to buy their textiles from the large factories. In any case we do not know how long these were in existence.

As far as the classification and dating of textile finds from the late antique are concerned, we are faced with the same great difficulties as in the field of sculpture. It is even more difficult to reach a reasonable conclusion, since in the majority of cases the provenance is unknown. When, at the end of the last century, R. Forrer and A. Gayet published the great textile finds of Achmim (Panopolis) and Antinoe, it was believed that a style of Achmim and a style of Antinoe could be distinguished. This turned out to be wrong, as we have also to take into consideration very many large and small centres of textile manufacture as well as these two towns, and numerous overlappings in style appear. An attempt was also made to distinguish the weaving technique of imported





110 Youthful Bacchus (?).  
Decorative panel, or trimming



111 Youth with a diadem. Small cover





112 Dionysos. Decorative panel or trimming



113 Ariadne (companion piece to pl. 112). Decorative panel or trimming



materials from the native work (Pfister established two contrasting methods of fastening the web). But J. Beckwith has very rightly pointed out that there are numerous pieces in which both the methods distinguished by Pfister appear together. Pfister's most important contribution to the classification of materials is his discovery that, from the Islamic period onwards a new substance was used for the red dye so that the colour appeared less bright. This provided a means of distinguishing the Coptic textiles of Islamic times from those of the late antique period. Further, an attempt has been made to distinguish the Hellenistic or late antique from Coptic materials (by M. Dimand and others). But this is not helpful either, at least as far as a chronology is concerned. Beckwith has also pointed out the difficulties here; with regard to the so-called Hellenistic pieces it is necessary to differentiate between those which take their models from contemporaneous paintings; those which, though they do copy from contemporary models, because of the weaver's lack of skill appear more or less degenerate; and lastly, those which originated in a period of renaissance. Periods of this kind, in which there was a turning to the antique heritage, were frequent in the late antique; the conscious adoption of antique motifs was known even in the eclectic art of the Ummayyad period. In addition to this, materials woven at home, without the experience of the factories and larger guilds, and without, too, their knowledge of the current fashions and style, readily also took over Hellenistic motifs. They were made as well as possible under the circumstances; but we cannot judge the date at which they were made by their difference from the antique prototypes and artistic canons. When it happened, as it certainly did in the late fifth and the sixth and seventh centuries, that Coptic weavers began to work on the production of tunics, covers or wall-hangings of this kind — and without this the continuance of production into Islamic times cannot be explained — it is impossible to say how much they varied the patterns taken from current fashions, and suited them to their own taste.

Textile finds which can be accurately dated by other objects, such as coins or dated grave inscriptions are extremely rare (and this is not entirely due to the completely inadequate methods of excavation mostly used) and when they do occur, they do not help with the problem of chronology of Coptic materials, because the patterns on them are so inadequate that they cannot be placed in any sequence.

Nor do the subjects of the pictures help. We saw that in Alexandria, the town of the Patriarchs, ivory carvers were still using pagan themes even as late as the sixth century so that it cannot be said that materials with mythological scenes or figures are early and those with Christian themes are late. In view of the astonishingly small number of pieces with undoubtedly Christian motifs, this hypothesis would require us to assume that as the country became Christian its textile industry collapsed, which the pieces that certainly originate in Islamic times (some with Kufic inscriptions) make nonsense of.

Thus it has not yet been possible to form a reliable chronology for the numerous pieces which have come down to us. There is not yet even an undisputed framework to work on and the position is almost worse than in the field of sculpture. The only hope



is that in time an exact study of the weaving technique will isolate groups which belong together, so that an attempt may be made to establish a chronological order in relation to the progress and development of this technique. This work is in progress and its results have not yet appeared. A successful outcome depends, naturally, on whether all the material can be classified.

Thus only an attempt can be made here to show, from selected examples, what the possibilities of wool weaving on linen are, to describe their designs and, in the few examples which can be tentatively dated, to find a grouping. At the same time an attempt can be made to single out what is Coptic in the narrower sense of the word.

*Plate 104* Firstly, there is a medallion in the Hermitage in Leningrad, showing the river god of the Nile (a companion piece shows Gaia, the earth goddess). The surround is formed by an only slightly stylized garland of flowers and leaves, a very popular motif in Roman art, which also appears frequently in late antique art. The god is represented with a naked torso, the left shoulder held back and his head turned to the right. The pectoral muscles are depicted strongly and naturalistically. A cornucopia throws deep shadows on to the left side of the body: it is finely shaded with lines and shows a highlight on its upper rim. The face of the white-haired god is strong and beautiful, very well proportioned and expressive, beard and hair are delicately waved and very naturalistic. A wreath of reeds is on his head. The very fine and well-preserved piece of weaving looks more like a painting. Without any doubt the weaver had an excellent painting as a model, which he took over without destroying its brilliance. The momentary turning of the head and body has a markedly antique appearance. It can be assumed that a fairly ancient Hellenistic tradition of great artistic merit lies behind our medallion. It certainly does not really belong to late antique art; everything about it is rooted in a vital and powerful Hellenistic tradition. The piece is usually dated to the third century, but it might possibly be placed in the second, since under the rule of the emperors Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, there was a strong Hellenistic and classical revival. We do not know what this medallion and its companion piece were used for; from their shape they could have been decorative panels on a ceremonial tunic, but as at so early a date it was only in the little or not at all Hellenized outer provinces of the empire that tunics were decorated in this way, it is more likely that they formed the decoration of a linen hanging or curtain.

We know of large numbers of these wall-hangings. Their size varies considerably; in Lucerne a piece nearly four metres in length was put up for auction. Moreover, it was very roughly and incorrectly cobbled up, so perhaps had originally been even longer. It is true that wall-hangings are usually smaller, especially as they are mostly woven in one piece, and the looms would have permitted any increase in size only with difficulty. Wall-hangings were obviously used in the houses of the nobility and well-to-do instead of wall-paintings, and were thus something like the precursors of tapestries or carpets. Smaller pieces were perhaps similarly used as decorative panels — or like wall-hangings today, to decorate a room in special places. The Staatliche Museen in Berlin formerly



possessed very large fragments of a wall-hanging of this kind (1.29 metres long), which showed large, somewhat schematically drawn figures in richly varied colours, divided by stylized garlands of leaves. Two fragments of these pieces, which were burnt in the last war, are illustrated. One shows a dancer with castanets, the other a young man standing with his legs crossed in the Indian pose that has already been described. The figures, worked in brilliant colours, are, so far as the fragments permit us to see, very well drawn and well proportioned, but appear flat because of the strong outlining of the naked portions of the body, and the very schematic rendering of the folds. In distinct contrast with the Nile god in Leningrad, the faces are not represented naturalistically, but reduced to a few formal lines, and clearly show a different style from that of the river god. Plate 109



XVI Bird with a bulla and an ivy leaf. Wool weaving on linen. Fragment of a wall-hanging



The plants at the feet of the dancer are treated in a similar decorative and unnaturalistic manner. The fragments are supposed to belong to the fourth century, and they may be placed at its beginning, since the coolly classical pose, combined with the flatness of the representation, and the folds almost giving the effect of stripes, is reminiscent of the art of the Tetrarchs.

*Plate 105* A fragment in the British Museum takes us a step further. It shows two *putti* in a boat, one is steering and the other has a fishing rod with a little fish on it. The beautifully decorated boat appears to be placed on a pedestal, but this may be meant to represent the water and the reflection of the boat in it. A luxuriant garland surrounds the fragment on three sides; in the corners are little medallions with heads on them. The left-hand one of these is very vivid, but the right-hand one is somewhat flat and sketchy. The *putti*, especially the one steering, are very well observed; one has hair blown by the wind and the other has a sun hat on his head. The face of the boy steering is that of a street Arab, and is charming simply for this reason. This fragment shows a different technique from that of the two described above, which look almost like Gobelins tapestry. Here the parts which are worked in colour — the background is everywhere plain linen — are formed of a multitude of small loops which appear somewhat angular. Beckwith has put it very well, when he describes this technique as reminiscent of mosaic. It looks as though a little wall-mosaic has been imitated here in material; even the texture of mosaic has been retained. This technique is not rare, it is usually only used for *putti* and heads similar to those we see here in the corner medallions. It looks as though all the pieces of this kind originated from one workshop, operating over a long period. The representations are mostly antique in character. Indeed the theme of the London piece originates from one very popular everywhere in mosaics, the so-called Nile landscapes, that is to say, large scenes which portray life on the Nile and its banks. The substitution of *putti* for people seems to have been particularly popular in the fourth century. We find this, for example, in the oldest church in South Aquileia (between 312 and 318), as well as in the mosaics of the Piazza Armerina; they gambolled on the lost mosaics of Santa Constanza in Rome (mid-fourth century) and in the cupola mosaics of the Mausoleum of Centcelles (Spain, mid-fourth century). The type of *putto* most closely resembling those in our fragment is that of the few surviving *putti* heads of Centcelles. We may therefore also place our fragment in the middle of the fourth century. It shows appreciably more feeling for form in its charming figures and in the luxuriant garlands than the large Berlin fragments, which is an indication that these workshops, which were some of the finest in the land, (and therefore probably situated in Alexandria) must have understood the prevailing fashion and tried to adapt it.

*Plate 107* We see again another type in a large, unfortunately very much damaged wall-hanging from Antinoe, now in the Louvre. This is not woven but painted. Similar examples, with Christian subject matter, are preserved in the Staatliche Museen in Berlin, regrettably in an even worse condition. In the example in Paris the composition is easily recognizable.









115 Medallions with heads of fauns, philosophers, officials and women. Wall-hanging (detail)



A broad horizontal band shows lively figures from the Dionysian Thiasus ranged next to each other, hardly over-lapping; above this is a wavy line which mingles very stylized acanthus leaves with vine leaves and grapes; little animals are placed here and there in the curves. This double frieze is unified in meaning, showing as it does the god of wine's followers dancing under the plants sacred to him. It is divided by a narrow band with rosettes from an upper one which shows in a continuous row scenes from the youth of Dionysos: one can make out the birth, and to the right, the first bath of the divine boy. A final horizontal band, with very schematized tendrils, forms the upper edge. The whole composition appears as if it had been taken from a relief; the figures are very life-like, the drawing is excellent and the feeling for life is marked and incontestably antique. This masterly work can very probably be dated to the so-called Theodosian Renaissance of about 400, a short golden age of art. We know numerous examples of the work of silversmiths and ivory carvers that are very closely related to this wall-hanging in style and expression, and witness in the same way a revival of the antique in form and content.

No-one could or would seriously doubt that all these materials were inspired by the antique or late antique spirit, and were made in Greek workshops. The large fragments in Berlin are most characteristically late antique, and already basically estranged from the classical antique, but in no ethnical sense can they be called Coptic. The others belong to late antique art more on account of their date than because of their form and content. This is also unreservedly true for the large wall-hanging in the Metropolitan Museum, *Plate 115* a part of which is illustrated here. The series of heads, some depicting men and women and some fauns, are genuine children of the antique. A piece in the British Museum, other *Plate 118* fragments of which are scattered in various museums and collections, among them Recklinghausen, shows a somewhat different picture.

The wall-hanging is divided by vertical bands. In each high narrow space thus formed there is a figure surrounded by rosettes. In both the outer bands we see figures of dancers between thin, leafy stems, surrounded by a thick row of overlapping hearts. The central band shows a thick leafless branch, with regular curves, in which also, dancers are placed. All the naked parts of the bodies are woven in a dark purple that is almost black. What remains, the garments, flowers and the decoration surrounding the central band, shows a fresh though sparing use of polychromatic colour. Among the small figures we find some that appear to descend directly from those on the painted curtain from Antinoe. There must have been a good Hellenistic model to hand, as is shown also by the youth with the shield, who appears several times among the figures. The proportions are good, the movements correct, and represented with a certain elegance; the details are woven in with white threads on the purple. The flatness and graphic quality of the representation looks extremely late antique, but this may be due to the materials used, particularly the purple wool, which did not allow shading and highlights. Only the slightly caricatured drawing of the faces, the affectedly posed little fingers, and the inelegant stiffness in the left-hand youth's stance are disconcerting. This is even more striking in the fragment in



Plate XVIII Recklinghausen. In it the eyes are exaggeratedly large, the tear ducts are drawn down to the cheek-bones, the eyebrows are thick rolls, the nose, drawn in double lines, is enlarged like a snout and the tip is hideously broad, and the mouth reduced to two lines, is placed low on the chin. The pectoral muscles look definitely female, and reminiscent of a hermaphrodite.

Here we are face to face with the problem indicated by Beckwith: the model is undoubtedly Hellenistic; but is this an example of a craftsman of poor artistic ability producing deviations from the antique ideal of human representation, or is it a later copy of a Hellenistic original, influenced by a new un-antique style? The dating of pieces of this kind is extremely difficult, if not impossible. We may only assume that these works belong to the fifth century, without being able to be more precise, because it is uncertain what can be attributed to lack of artistic ability and what to a change in style.

Plate 130 A completely different kind of wall-hanging, which in appearance has nothing in common with the pieces influenced by the antique, has appeared in recent years in auctions of the house of Ars Antiqua in Lucerne. There are astonishingly large numbers of these fragments, though badly and wrongly patched up. As already mentioned, the largest piece measures almost four metres in length. Some pieces with praying figures, had been known earlier, (for example, one in the Detroit Institute of Arts), and others are now in the possession of the Ikonenmuseum in Recklinghausen. The technique is connected with the mosaic-like loop weavings, which we have already seen on Hellenistic pieces, but they are slightly different: either the knotted wool threads are cut so that the effect is that of a carpet, or the threads are drawn over numerous padding threads with a rather smooth and stiff effect, so that the impression is more of embroidery than weaving. Men and women, strictly *en face*, stand on the great wall tapestries with their hands raised in prayer, as in the fragment in Detroit. Robes and faces are completely flat, no attempt is made at light and shade to give an effect of form; on the contrary, everything, including the architectural surround, is absolutely two-dimensional. The proportions are bad, the little arms project like hooks from plank-like bodies. The heads are rather large, and the faces are drawn with a few, mostly straight lines. The colours are rich but subdued: very dark blue, brown, ochre, brick-red, dark green and white. Of the architectural framework of the large piece, all that one can see, unfortunately, from the fragments illustrated here, is an arcade over the worshipper on the fragment in Detroit. It shows us enough, however, of the completely flat, ornamental manner, in which the pillars and arches are rendered, in a way reminiscent of Upper Egyptian funerary stelae. Particularly characteristic of this is the transformation of the bases of the pillars into squares with a coloured surround, and the division of the shafts by coloured stripes, different for each pillar. The soul-bird, with the *bullā* on its breast, which in this case is shown to be Christian by its little cross, is also a legacy from Upper Egyptian stelae. The fragment in Recklinghausen shows a full length figure of the soul-bird, in a characteristic attitude with outstretched wings and the head turned to look backwards. In the large wall-hangings a similar bird

Plate XVI

196



XVII Horsemen. Wool  
weaving on linen.  
Fragment of a  
wall-hanging



has been preserved only in a fragmentary condition; it is in a large arcade above a row of worshippers, in a second one it is represented as a peacock. An example, unique up to now, is the horseman of Recklinghausen. He appears to wear a breastplate, the upper part of the body being in ochre and in contrast to the dark green of the rest of the clothing. In his outstretched right hand he appears to hold a cross. There is no parallel to this among any of the large wall-hangings or fragments of the same kind and technique but we have already come across the mounted saints in the sculpture of the Greeks as well as the Copts on the Nile. The harness of the horse of the Greek mounted saint from Achmim corresponds to that on the Recklinghausen fragment; the head with the human eyes is also similar. The singular clothing is un-antique, it has its closest parallel on the door lintel from the Faiyum on which Christ entering Jerusalem is shown similarly clothed. The meaning of the figure is uncertain. If it is really meant to represent a man in armour, there are two possibilities: either it is Constantine the Great, the first Christian emperor who was victorious at Pons Milvius near Rome under the holy emblem of the Cross, or it is a martyr who was a soldier, and raises the cross as the sign of his Christian death. It is not possible to be more certain since the fragment is the only one of its kind.

*Plate XVII*

*Plate 96*



This wall-hanging can be only roughly dated. Its finished and difficult technique, its design, the uniform sureness of its own particular form of expression, suggest that it may be regarded as the product of a previous Coptic tradition unknown to us, as it is unlikely that a new method of textile art would have begun with so considerable an undertaking. It would be difficult to accept a date before the fifth century, and H. W. Müller has therefore placed the piece auctioned in Lucerne in this period. It might be possible, however, to advance this date to the sixth century, since the nearest parallel to the form of the horse, especially the head with the human eyes and still-legged pose, is found in ivory carvings of the late sixth century.

According to uncertain evidence, the first piece sold in Lucerne comes from Achmim, the ancient Greek settlement of Panopolis, almost opposite the town of Ptolemais. The other pieces and fragments are of unknown provenance. If the apparent origin of one of the large wall-hangings is Achmim, and this at first suggests that it is the product of a Greek provincial workshop, its relationship with Upper Egyptian stelae of known Coptic origin contradicts this completely. Above all, it is basically completely alien in form and style both to the antique and late antique.

Here for the first time we see examples of Coptic work in textiles. The great wall-hangings with the praying figures must have been made to decorate churches. The weaver had been thoroughly trained in all the refinements of Greek technique, but he had not even attempted to imitate the Greek method of figure representation. On the contrary, he represented his human beings in exactly the same way as his brother artists did in sculpture, in conscious rejection of the antique ideal in the representation of figures, which the Greek weavers at least attempted to achieve, even when they were no longer always successful. Wall-hangings of this kind range themselves beside that sculpture which is Coptic in the narrower sense of the word, and they are completely outside the sphere of late-antique Greek textile art.

Apart from these groups of works there is another fairly complete group to which alone belong a number of wall-hangings, artistically quite remarkable and very important in theme. Firstly a famous piece in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, showing two nereids. One rides on a creature that is half-fish and half-bull, which turns to kiss her, the other is mounted on a creature of which only the fish-tail remains. She looks into a mirror which surprisingly reflects her fair hair as dark. The nereids are surrounded by an elegant pattern of antithetically depicted half-palmettes of acanthus, enclosing birds. This piece, with its elegant and fanciful design and its tired mythological theme, has been placed in the fourth or fifth century (for example, by Thatcher), but Beckwith has given good reasons for its inclusion in the renaissance movement of the seventh century. We can add to his reasons the fact that an ivory tablet in the Trieste Museum, which comes from the same milieu as the reliefs in Aachen, also includes the remarkable kissing scene. The hair-styles of the ladies point to the sixth or seventh century. As numerous works in silver from Constantinople show, there was once again a conscious return to the antique at this



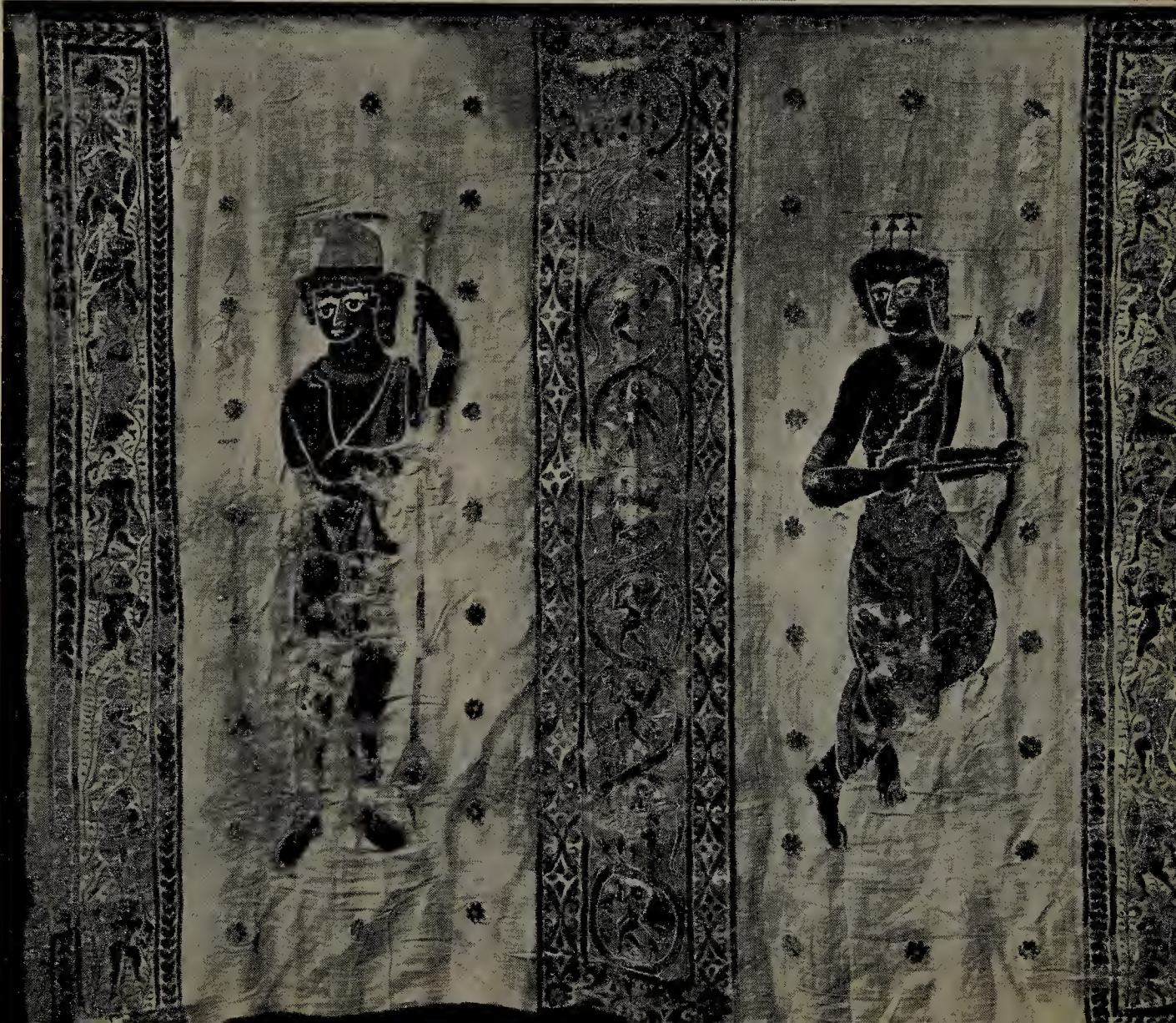
116 Girl and youth.  
Decorative panel  
or trimming



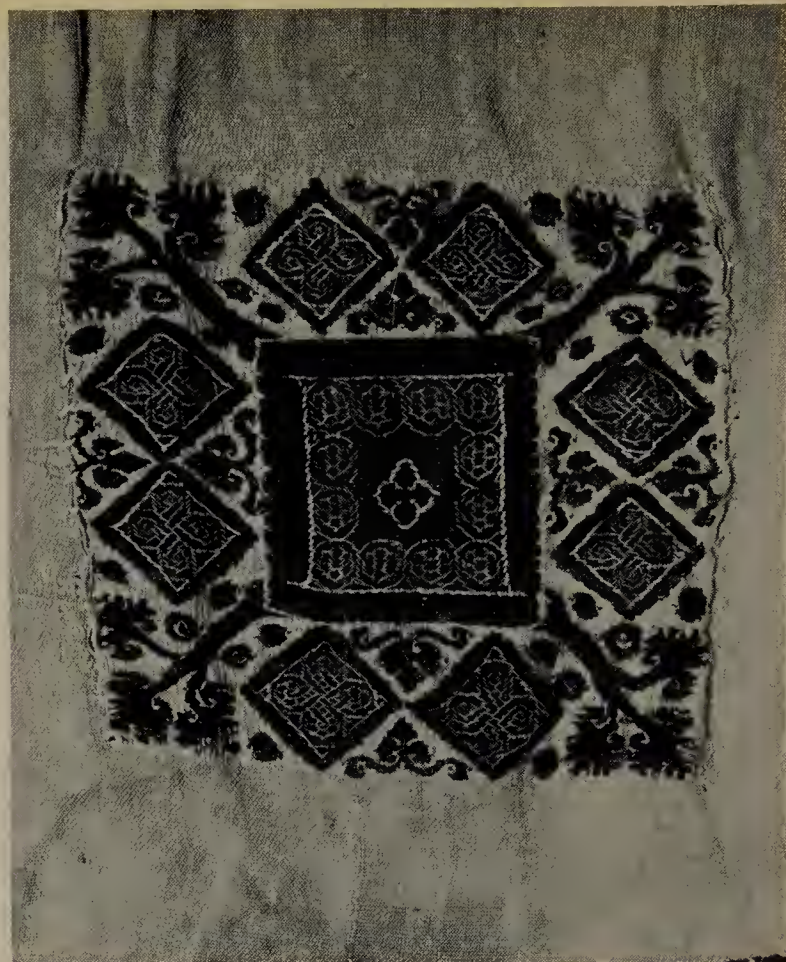
117 Peter and Paul.  
Small cover



118 Huntsmen, in  
the vertical  
bands, male and  
female dancers.  
Wall-hanging

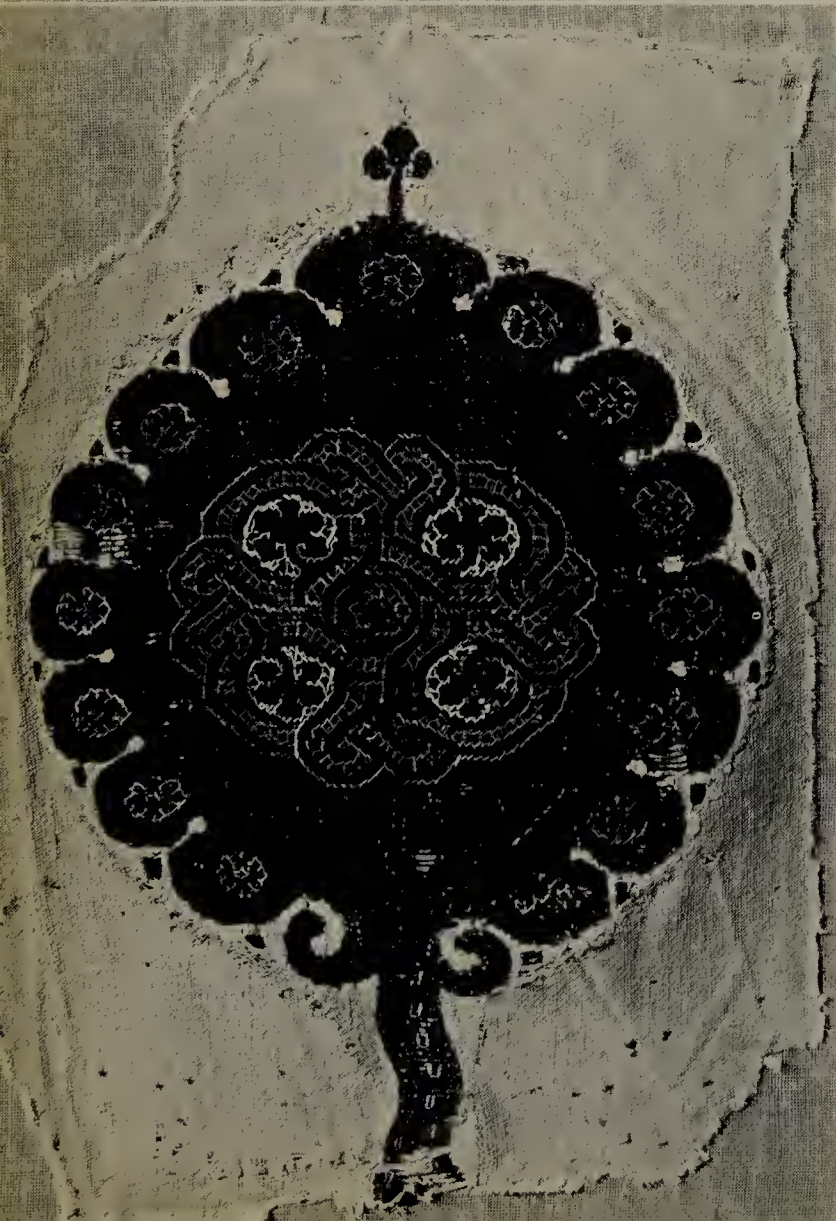






119 Stylized tree with grapes. Trimming

121 Decorative trimming



120 Decorative trimming



period, one of the numerous Byzantine renaissance movements of which we know. Mythological themes were obviously used without hesitation for objects of secular use or household ornament, although the empire was completely Christian. They no longer had a religious meaning, especially as the fervent belief in demons of the Copts remained quite alien to the Greeks, but they provided such pleasing and decorative motifs that no-one wanted to give them up. It looks as if this renaissance originated directly from the imperial court and, as our example shows, its influence reached as far as the manufacturing centres in Egypt, which produced work for the shrunken empire, and once more raised their standards to an astonishing height. It must be assumed, in view of the political events, that this wall-hanging and the others like it originated in the period between the Sassanian conquest of the Nile Valley and the beginning of the Arab invasion. A direct connection with the antique no longer existed, and it only provided the inspiration for the motifs and the model for the treatment of form; the un-antique appearance cannot be quite denied anywhere, one has only to look at such details as the faces, the arms, the affectedly posed hands, the neck and head of the bull, the high-arched cloaks and the decoration of the fish-tails. The late period can be clearly seen here, the antique heritage having been transposed and used only decoratively, although with pleasing effect.

A piece from the same collection, which shows two hunting scenes is directly connected with it. Here, however, there are slight oriental influences. For example, the upper huntsman wears a Syrian costume and the wild boar in the lower picture is very reminiscent of Sassanian work. The hunt, too, with bow and arrow, is not antique, it originates in Persia. Eastern influences of this kind are not to be wondered at in the time of Heraclius, the conqueror of the Sassanians. There may also be a few Coptic tendencies here since the grapes and vine leaves, which grow in the spaces of the two hunting scenes, are completely un-antique, and the *horror vacui* which is shown by their introduction has certainly been often enough met with in Coptic work. The representation of the human figure, however, is basically related to that of the nereids, so that one might regard them as products of the same workshop. Plate 133

The magnificent fragment in the Detroit Institute of Arts, showing a very expressive head of a woman with a nimbus, also belongs here. M. C. Ross took it to be Syrian; usually it is given a much earlier date, but here again Beckwith has indicated the correct explanation: though the piece stands considerably higher artistically than the wall-hanging with the nereids, yet it shows the same stylistic spirit. Only from masterpieces of this kind can one estimate how convincingly the antique spirit could be revived at this period, and what artistic skill was used on works of this kind. It is not certain whether the woman is a saint, since the nimbus could be used for secular figures also, even dancers. But it must be assumed that works of such excellence could only have been commissioned by those of the highest rank, in this case, the emperor's representative, the Patriarch Cyrus. Plate 114

A further masterpiece in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, the wall-hanging representing Hestia Polyolbos, is somewhat different. The goddess of the hearth, whose epithet means Plate 132



something like 'Rich in good deeds', is enthroned, *en face*, between six *putti* and two female allegorical figures. She wears a crown of fruits, large earrings, a rich necklace and broad bracelets to decorate her simple robe. Her seated position is no longer entirely successfully rendered; the goddess looks as if she might slip from her seat. The six *putti*, who hasten towards the goddess from both sides with exactly the same movement, hold round shields, on which the virtues of Hestia and her gifts are written in Greek (riches, joy, fame, abundance, virtue and progress); the two female personifications hold tablets, of which only the right-hand one has retained its inscription 'light'. The blue-green background is thickly covered with ornamental flowers and leaves on delicate stems.

This ceremonial picture is evidence of a paganism that is still alive; here mythology is by no means only an excuse for decoration. On the contrary, the wall-hanging (1.13 by 1.37 metres) has the nature of a genuine devotional picture in which we see a hieratical sternness similar to that in the Christian icons. It looks as though a rich and distinguished Greek pagan had consciously created a kind of opposing image to that of Christ, who was regarded by Christians as the giver of all gifts; Hestia gives her blessing to the gifts here by touching the shields, and she is herself characterized as 'Light' (one might suggest that the lost inscription on the other tablet was the word 'Life'). It may be dated to the late sixth century, since this piece does not quite have the look of the renaissance like those of the time of Heraclius which we have already mentioned. Rather there is much that is strongly reminiscent of Justinian art; therefore we very probably have to do with a precursor of the later school. The weaver has here shown the goddess majestically enthroned in the same way as the Christians claimed the imperial throne for Christ. The two personifications stand at a respectful distance like the bodyguards of the emperor or the angels of Christ. Even though the temples were closed and the pagan cults forbidden, this picture of Hestia Polyolbos shows that at least in their homes, many Greeks of the higher classes still practised the cult of the goddess of the hearth. Thus this tapestry, not artistically so remarkable, is extremely valuable proof of the continuance of Greek paganism in Egypt. Textiles of this group are not found among covers or among the fragments of clothing. The Hestia material shows that the workshop which knew how to make such excellent works was in action in the sixth century, although it achieved its finest work in the short renaissance of the seventh century. It did not, apparently, produce work for inferior purposes like clothing, but rather specialized in costly and beautiful large wall tapestries. We can assume that it was situated in Alexandria, since only the capital, with its close connection with Constantinople on the one hand, and its tradition in art and craftsmanship on the other, had the atmosphere and offered the opportunities for a workshop of this kind, the studio of a master. The oldest large wall-hangings may also have originated there; but the group woven in purple may equally well have come from one of the still vital Greek centres on the Nile. The piece in Recklinghausen is supposed to have come from Sheikh Abada. Antinoe may have been one of the places at which articles of this kind were made — but possibly they were bought in Alexandria.





XVIII Youth.  
Wool weaving on linen,  
fragment of a  
wall hanging  
from Sheikh Abada







Among the covers, we find no works of art comparable to the wall-hangings. These covers were found serving as coffin covers on which to place funerary gifts, or as funerary gifts themselves, and so on. They were probably originally used in distinguished households, and the few Christian examples were perhaps also used in churches. We can describe them briefly since there is nothing special about them. A little purple cover with a thick fringe around it, now in Berlin, is one of the very few pieces with a Christian subject. In a square, surrounded by a band with geometrically rendered foliate decoration, two very coarsely depicted bearded men are shown standing beside a tree. They are dressed in tunic and *pallium*, and the incompletely preserved inscription shows that they are intended to be Peter and Paul. They are not shown in the way which is usual in the iconography of the ancient Church, since Paul as well as Peter appears to have a luxuriant head of curly hair, as far as the damage allows us to see. The little cover resembles the later works woven in purple, which we have already seen in wall-hangings, but it is less carefully made and shows a greater decadence in form. This could have many different reasons, beginning with the weaver's lack of care with small pieces of work, and going on to the possibility that a less competent craftsman was at work here, or further, that it may be a question of date. The little cover can hardly be dated earlier than the fifth century, and how much later it is cannot be judged.

Plate 117

A cover in the Ikonenmuseum in Recklinghausen comes from Antinoe. It has two different kinds of decoration on a red linen background: a double row of very mis-shapen dancers who step as though in a country dance (the leg at the back appears to come from the upper thigh of the one in front), and bands along the edge and square panels woven in purple on a white ground. In these we see riders and centaurs appallingly misformed, as well as medallions with animals which are difficult to identify. Hellenistic models were still being followed, as can be seen from the galloping centaur in the left-hand corner of the band, whose movement is quite good and lively. But the forms are badly depicted. The rider behind the centaur is still worse. Here we may speak of degeneration, indeed, we must. The weaver did not only have very little imagination — repeating his motifs again and again — but also a marked lack of craftsmanship. One may assume that this is a product of domestic weaving, which follows the fashion, but is unable to rise to great stylistic heights. It may be mentioned in passing that unfortunately the greater part of the surviving late antique textiles from Egypt are of this inferior quality. Here, too, the work cannot be seriously described as 'Coptic', since the Copts would hardly have chosen the mythological figures or the lightly clad, seductively broad-hipped dancers, to ornament their weaving. That would have been too Greek, belonging to the world of the hated landlords, and was altogether too pagan and worldly. No, this work is either a painstaking but still mediocre home-made product or cheap mass-produced stuff. Be that as it may, it is difficult to date; the fifth century may be suggested, but with reservations, and a later date cannot be excluded. Beckwith prefers to place work of this kind in a later period, but his judgement may have been influenced by the theory of decadence.

Plate XIX



The Brooklyn Museum possesses a piece that is almost certainly Coptic. It was patched together in the art market, so that only the head in the centre of the little cover concerns us here. This almost childish face, delineated with a few strokes, with its goggling eyes, its broad nose and low forehead under flat hair on which is placed a diadem, is certainly of the same type as that on the Detroit fragment. It has a still more mask-like appearance, and gives a stranger and more archaic impression, like a primitive cult-image. The technique — loop-weaving — is moreover the same as in the Coptic wall-hangings, and it may be placed roughly in the same category. Its date must remain undecided, although the production of such a piece cannot be imagined before the awakening of artistic self-confidence in the Copts, that is to say, before the fifth century, but how much later it should be dated we do not know.

Before we consider the fragments of clothing, let us take a short look at the materials the original use of which we do not know for certain. These are pieces on which a continuous pattern has been preserved, or on which such a pattern may be assumed from what remains. First let us take a piece of silk fabric which is in the Dumbarton Oaks Collection, and is known as the 'Samson panel'. The fragment shows four rows, each with three partly damaged representations of a struggle with an animal; a man in a short, girdled tunic, which leaves one shoulder free, kneels upon a lion and tears open its jaws with his hands. The theme is unusual in early Christian art, but not unknown, though Samson is usually shown facing the lion. On a silver plate from Cyprus, however, now in the New York Metropolitan Museum, David is shown slaying the lion in the same attitude, and so too is Herakles fighting the hind on a marble relief of the sixth century, now in the Museo Nazionale in Ravenna. To consider this mythological hero as the subject of the silk material is out of the question, as in the first place he is always represented naked, and secondly he is always shown strangling the lion, whereas Samson tears it apart. (*Jud.* 14, 6). What is remarkable is that this motif is used here decoratively, since Samson's struggle with the lion was considered as the Old Testament original of the defeat of the devil by Christ. A similar use of a sacred theme is unknown to us in early Christian art.

The struggle is shown in two opposing or antithetical representations. Each row of figures is divided by two bands consisting of squares and foliate decoration, also placed antithetically. This pattern could continue in all directions (a so-called endless pattern). What this silk material was intended for is unknown. It is possible that it was used as a curtain screening the altar (before the general use of the iconostasis, the altar was covered by a curtain at the moment of transubstantiation), and in this case the motif could have served to represent Christ's victory over hell and death.

The red background of the silk, the drawing of the faces, the very linear yet flowing treatment of the folds, suggest that the fragment is related to the famous silk piece from the Capella Sancta Sanctorum in Rome, which shows the Annunciation and the birth of Christ. This also has a similar twill binding. Fragments of it are to be found in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. The date of this piece is much disputed, and there is



hardly a period between the sixth and tenth century which has not been suggested. Thatcher places it in the sixth or seventh century, Beckwith thinks the Umayyad period probable. This might be supported by the degradation of the motif to a mere pattern. But for stylistic reasons, I think the time of the Emperor Heraclius, in the seventh century, is more likely. The workshop must have been in Alexandria; artistic influences from Byzantium, for which these silks were doubtless woven, appear in the classical treatment of the garments and the well-proportioned figures; both are in accordance with Hellenistic artistic principles in the style of the renaissance, which came about, as we have established several times already in the time of Heraclius.

The second piece, also in Dumbarton Oaks, is completely different. This fragment, *Plate 126* likewise of silk, shows two mounted Amazons, placed antithetically in an oval frame. They aim at the leaping leopards under their horses with their bows and arrows. The surrounding band contains a plant design, and similar decoration is set in the medallions in the axes. In the corners of the material the remains of thin palmettes may be recognized. All the decoration is in white on a purple ground. The cut-off parts of the design allow one to see that originally there was a pattern of ovals linked by medallions, a Byzantine adaptation of a Sassanian type of decoration, which consisted of intertwined bands with large circles and small loops. The design originated in Iran, as did the very heraldic antithetical method of representation and the hunt on horseback with bow and arrow. But the Amazons originate in Hellenic mythology, and the execution of the work has numerous affinities with late classical art, so that it must be assumed that this is a Sassanian fashion adapted to early Byzantine taste. Here, too, the most probable date seems to be in the time of Heraclius. The workshop would also have been in Alexandria, since purple silk would hardly have been used in the more distant towns, artistically impoverished as they were. The fragment, in which the heraldic type of pattern could be likewise endlessly repeated, shows to what degree the Alexandrian workshops were subject to foreign fashions because of the kind of commissions they received, and thereby took over oriental motifs which were as strange to their own tradition as they were to imperial art. By far the greatest number of late antique materials from Egypt come in the form of clothing. Fashion in clothing radically changed at the latest by about the year 300. The appended sketches show the principal designs of the tunic found in Egypt and their decoration, in order to give an idea of how the fragments, of which we shall now consider a selection, may have been used.

Perhaps the medallion in the Hermitage, showing the Nile god, was a panel of *Plate 104* a ceremonial tunic, though serious doubts can be cast on this. Such doubts, however, do not exist regarding a piece in the Louvre. It shows the bust of a youth with a crown *Plate 110* of leaves on his hair, and a nimbus; it is surrounded by a simple frame set with a row of hearts placed one upon the other, and in the corners are circles with an X upon them. Possibly it is meant to be Bacchus. The drawing is completely two-dimensional and thickly outlined, there is no attempt at light and shade. This shows a certain

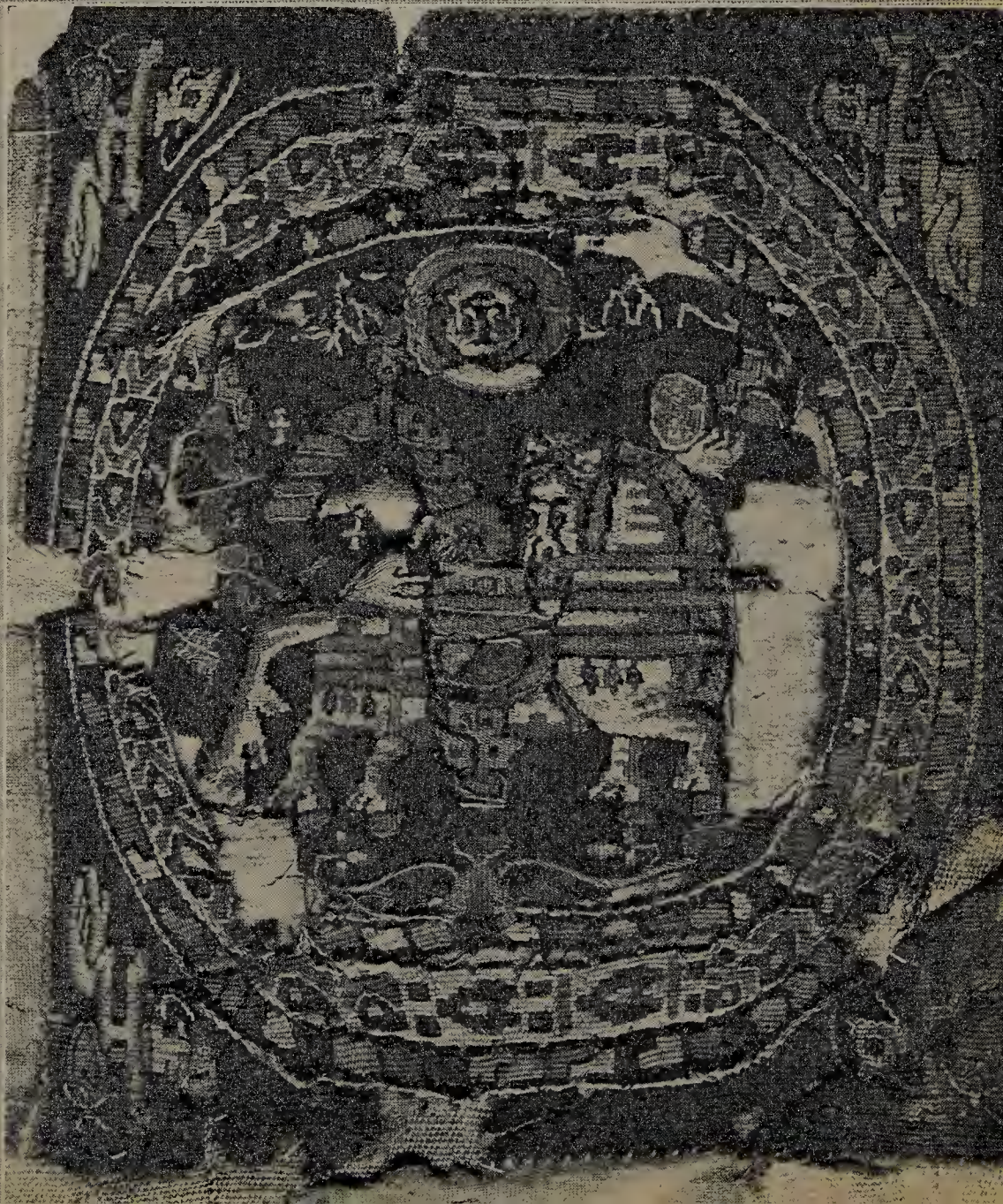


Plate 109 relationship with the great wall-hanging in Berlin, and we may regard this piece as belonging to the same period. In spite of its lack of modelling it is a striking example, with its clear and beautiful drawing and its slight suggestion of movement, of genuine late antique textile art on the Nile, which was beginning to free itself from the bonds of Hellenistic representation of the human form.

Plates 112, 113 Though Beckwith gives a much later date, the sixth century, to the two panels showing Dionysos and his spouse Ariadne which are in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, it appears that a certain resemblance to the piece in Paris warrants an earlier dating. R. Noll suggests the fourth century. The decoration of the frame, circles of extended acanthus palmettes, linked with jewels and filled with fruit, flowers and a bird, is decidedly unclassical and shows certain affinities with Sassanian decoration, although not in the hardness of its execution. The head is less well drawn than that of the Dionysos in Paris, and the hair is rendered in a completely ornamental way. All this speaks of a greater intrinsic separation from the antique. But is this evidence for a much later date? In the head of Ariadne, the *bullā* round her neck and the many-coloured diadem are striking. Her head more closely resembles the Dionysos in Paris than does that of her spouse, but on the other hand her bust is still more abstract. One would hardly look for the weaver of these two pieces in Alexandria, he is plainly a provincial. Thus we are faced once more with the almost insoluble problem of dating. Without being able to give any evidence, I would not exclude the fifth century.

Before we consider other examples, something must be said about the motifs of the panels and borders of the tunics. Egger has expressed surprise that the Copts, although only loosely linked with Greek culture and increasingly Christian since the second century, took over so much that was classical in their textile motifs. This is a false conclusion. There were no Copts at work, only Greeks. And they did not become Christian at such an early date, as we have seen. It is not surprising that they drew inspiration from the world of ideas that had come down to them. It should be asked, rather, why they clung so long to these subjects, and why they shunned Christian subjects to such an extent. This can probably be accounted for by the fact, to be seen in all folk art, and especially in crafts, that the motifs are always handed down even when they have been drained of all meaning, or the meaning has long been forgotten. In addition, one must remember that in the late classical period, people did not consider their old subject matter in any way irreconcilable with the new faith, so that gods appeared in biblical scenes or Cupid and Psyche in catacomb paintings. But Egger is quite misguided when he wants to see recollections of hieroglyphs in pictures of hares, or men with raised arms. The hare is only one animal among many that appear. Why should it alone be a hieroglyph brought up to date? And the men with raised arms are worshippers everywhere else. Why not here too? Why should only the Greeks in the Nile Valley have such recollections? It











is simpler and more enlightening to assume that in the late classical period, their love of decoration led them to weave the accustomed themes and figures again and again in the trimmings, borders and *clavi* of the tunics. The recipients of the greater part of the textile production were citizens of other parts of the empire, to whom hieroglyphs in Hellenized form would have meant nothing. They would not even have noticed that some of the details of the decorative motifs were intended to have a deeper meaning. Considerably worse than this mistake, the result of over-enthusiasm, is that of an anonymous author who attempted to describe the New York wall-hanging as a debate between Christian and pagan philosophers, so that the horned heads of the fauns represent diabolical pagan thought. Such mistaken explanations are bound to appear, however, when the fact that it was the Greeks, deeply rooted in paganism, and not the Christian Copts, who produced the greater part of the 'Coptic' textiles is not known or lost sight of.

Plate 115

Let us return to the objects themselves. As with the wall-hangings, there is also purple weaving among the panels. There is a decorative panel in Berlin, which is an example of a work executed entirely in purple. In a square we see, on the right, a naked youth walking with a large wine-jar on his shoulder, and looking round at a girl, also naked, who follows him with a basket of flowers. The empty space is largely covered with flowers and rows of leaves, and the frame is set with a row of medallions with little spiral scrolls and abstract decoration. The girl is much more successfully represented in proportion and posture than her companion, except that her feet are drawn so that they look like combs. As in the provincial Greek sculpture of Egypt, this representation is dominated by the marked exhibitionism of the naked bodies. This border might have originated from a workshop such as the one which produced the wall-hanging in the British Museum. The face of the youth, especially, is drawn in the same way as the faces of the leaders of the apostles on the little cover in Berlin. It can be assumed from this, that these manufacturers were not too specialized as far as the purpose of their products was concerned, only inasmuch as they worked in purple.

Plate 116

Plate 118

Plate 117

We know prototypes of this sort of decoration for garments dating from the early second century from the Syrian desert town of Palmyra; in a grave of AD 103, a tunic with purple *clavi* and panels was found. But this tunic from Palmyra, claimed by Dimand as the original of the late antique Egyptian garments, has decorative ornamentation without figures, which consists principally of knots and plaited bands, on the woollen weaving. Ornamentation of this kind is found in Egypt too, and it is not improbable that this fashion originated in the Near East. We illustrate two examples in Berlin. One shows a square with a plain band as a frame; round the edges of the square are twelve circles containing rosettes worked in white, and in the centre is a cross. Small schematic trees extend diagonally from the corners of the square, accompanied by little discs. In the spaces between, squares are placed diamond-wise, filled with knot decoration, each knot

Plate 120



being in the form of a cross. Palmettes are placed between them, so that very little of the white background is empty. This purely ornamental type of design may most probably be traced back to oriental prototypes; here, it is certainly to be regarded as Christian, the cross and the knots in the form of a cross make that clear. At the same time, it is interesting to note that the knot is a very ancient magic symbol for warding off demons which, in order to become more powerful, also takes on the form of the Christian sacred symbol. Pieces of this kind are already known from the fourth century: Petrie found at Hawara a grave of about 340 in which there was a medallion decorated with knots in this way. Certainly the dating of our piece cannot be decided; for this type of weaving no facts are known which would enable us to establish this.

*Plate 121* The knotting is somewhat more complicated in another piece in Berlin, which shows the stylized silhouette of a tree. It contains no Christian symbols, but this does not mean that it should not be considered older than the piece with the squares. This kind of plaiting and knotting, and others even more complicated had been popular for a long time.

*Plate 119* Following on to this we should mention another panel, which does not take the tree silhouette solely as a background for a geometrical design, but really represents a tree, if only in a very symmetrical form reminiscent of an espalier. It is probably intended as a vine, since four clumsy bunches of grapes are woven in about the middle of it. This does not necessarily mean that the piece comes from the garment of a Christian, we saw

*Plate V* the grape in the Isis mysteries of Antinoe, for example, and it played a not unimportant part in the cult of Dionysos.

*Plate XVIII* Apart from these works entirely in purple, there are others among the garment panels, which, like the fragment of a wall-hanging in Recklinghausen, make use of purple as the main colour, but combine it with other colours. As an example of this, we show a decorative panel that was recently offered in the art market. The inner square

*Plate XX* shows a dancing nereid waving her mantle over her head in front of a sea monster; little fish, and strokes which may be intended to indicate the waves, fill in the space round this group. In the surround, rosettes in circles are placed in the middle of each side, and between them all kinds of animals. Besides the purple, the colours used are bright red and ochre. Such works are intermediaries between those entirely in purple and the polychrome pieces, and show the connection between them. It would therefore be as well not to date them too early since originally the two main techniques seem to have existed side by side. In our piece, too, the degeneration of the forms and the reduction of the body to ornament — for example, the ochre stripe on the torso of the nereid — is far advanced. It is probably not only a question of artistic quality but also of style which had changed — one could say, had been 'Coptic-made'? It is hardly possible to date this piece before the late fifth century.

Let us turn once more, this time for its motif, to a work entirely in purple. A circular  
*Plate 123* panel in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, shows a rider galloping towards  
212 the right. The drawing of the horse is excellent and the figure of the rider is still very





XIX Dancers, horseman and animals. Wool weaving on linen. Detail of a cover from Sheikh Abada

reminiscent in pose and proportion of Hellenistic prototypes. The face is certainly very much simplified, with a few light strokes drawn in the purple, but still considerably more naturalistic than those of the apostles or the youth with the wine jar. The late period is apparent in the pressure of decoration round the figure, the obtrusion of unrelated ornamentation and the introduction of the much too large hare under the hoofs of the steed. The piece is no remarkable work of art, but shows the dominance of an old tradition. The meaning of the rider is not clear, he holds a round object in his raised right hand, which could be taken for a globe signifying rulership.

The meaning is clearer in the fragment of a border in Berlin. The piece belongs technically to a quite different tradition; the design is in white on a red ground, similar to the silk Amazon fragment in Dumbarton Oaks. Echoes of Sassanian patterns can also be clearly recognized; it is true the medallions are separated but the little discs linking them still appear, although isolated, as does the decoration between the circles which, indeed, show Persian forms. The medallion surrounds, however, are decorated with a somewhat sparse tendril and the decorations of the spaces are no longer placed anti-thetically. Thus Persia provided only the inspiration, which was not slavishly taken over, but adapted to suit individual decorative taste. In one of the medallions we see a horseman, this time not naked except for the little floating cloak, but clad in *chlamys* and armour. With his lance he strikes at a snake which winds between the hoofs of the heavily pacing

Plate 122



war-horse. Two spirits with wreaths in their hands fly over him, to crown him. This is the ancient oriental motif of the knightly victor over evil, symbolized by the snake, which has here been taken over by Christianity as can be seen in the neighbouring medallion, which depicts a cross in the middle of indistinct tendrils. The picture has been supposed to be of Solomon (Wulff, Volbach). The more probable assumption is that the Christian emperor is meant, since on the coins of the Christian Roman emperors of east and west, the motif of a ruler treading a snake under foot often appears. The emperor as the victorious fighter against evil, embodied in the serpent, in the Christian view representing Satan, can be understood as part of the imperial ideology of the Christian empire, in which the emperor ruled the world as Christ's regent, His earthly image, and was obliged to defend the true faith against its enemies. That a picture of this kind appearing in Egypt must have had a Greek source need no longer be argued. It may be dated to the second half of the sixth century.

*Plate 124* A polychrome panel in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London has abandoned the rider's ideological guise, which has by now lost all its meaning. Beckwith has given good reasons for placing it in the late sixth or early seventh century. It is distinctly inferior to both the pictures of riders already discussed, by reason of its thickset appearance and mediocre proportioning: the heads of both man and beast are disproportionately large. The right hand is raised in a gesture which we have seen in victors and rulers since the end of the second century, but in spite of the elegantly fluttering mantle, the clothing is not appropriate. Instead of the heroically naked youth, still gracefully antique, and the armoured emperor in solemn triumph, here we have an almost peasant-like, rough young man, with a satisfied expression. His mount does not look noble, in fact it is more like a cart-horse. The representation is astonishingly like folk art, and that is all the more to be wondered at, since the animals in the surround do not lack a humorous naturalism, showing that the traditions of the so-called Nile landscape have not been forgotten, that is to say it is a Hellenistic creation. The colours are very delicate, a light blue ground, some graduated tones and sand-grey, only the bright red of the fruit in the surround, the trappings of the horse and the boots of the rider, are slightly out of keeping.

If this decorative panel in London is evidence of the slow and by no means unattractive transition of Hellenistic weaving to a robust folk art, a completely different picture is given us by a piece in Vienna. It must be examined very closely in order to decipher the picture at all. In a medallion surrounded by a three-fold somewhat mis-shapen surround, an emperor rides towards the right. The short-legged, heavily pacing horse turns its head right round. Its reins and trappings have become broad bands, which cut across the horse's body in strictly parallel lines. The rider appears to be standing and letting the horse go through his straddled legs; his body is fully extended and his foot is on the same level as the horse's hoofs. What the emperor is wearing can no longer be identified. All his clothing, except for the cloak which is outspread on both sides like wings, is divided into patches and short transverse folds. His right arm holding a lily sceptre curves round





129 Samson fighting the lion.  
Silk







like an over-large handle. His left hand comes out behind the neck of the horse, and on it lies a globe that looks as if it were about to roll off. The three stripes of the surround are covered with angular bright coloured decoration, of which the innermost derives from the bead and disc pattern, the middle one suggests much formalized foliate decoration, and the outer one is a misinterpreted cord roll. In the four corners are *putti*, shown as ugly caricatures with huge staring eyes. The faces of these creatures can still be recognized as human, but the face of the emperor, surrounded by hair like a band, and a nimbus, is a frightful grotesque; a shape like a little tree represents the mouth, nose, eyebrows and lines of the forehead, and where one would expect the cheekbones there are two huge eyes. Dimand presumes that the prototype of this representation of the emperor, which is quite often found, stylized in varying degrees, is an image of the Emperor Heraclius as the conqueror of the Sassanian, as for example, we see it in an oval panel in the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. There, as here, a Sassanian leaf palmette is shown under the emperor's feet, and there, as here, the horse looks completely to the rear, and the harness is similar in both pieces; only in the London piece it is somewhat more delicate and can clearly be seen to be a horse's harness, whereas in the Vienna piece, by contrast, it has the quality of a wooden partition. The insignia of the emperor, including the nimbus, is the same. In the piece in London, two chained Persians are shown by the side of the horse, and at its feet a lion and a hyena eating a gazelle. Though the panel in London is by no means naturalistic — the emperor's face is also much mis-shapen (the mouth is omitted, which emphasizes the owl-like look) — it is nevertheless considerably clearer and more realistic than the figure in the Vienna piece, which is distorted almost to a grotesque idol. The victory of Heraclius over the Great King of the Sassanian dynasty, Chosroes II Parvez, took place in 627. The emperor won back the Holy Cross and brought it back to Jerusalem in 629. This event signified a great triumph for orthodox Christianity. It may well be imagined that the Greeks never grew tired of representing the conqueror of the Persians and the rescuer of the Cross from the pagans, and even of wearing his image on their clothing. Thus he appears on the piece in London as the Christian emperor and the victor over the empire's enemies, who were at the same time the thieves of the Cross. In contrast, the Vienna piece avoids any suggestion of the victory over the Persians; it does not show the Emperor Heraclius, but an anonymous emperor, not in triumph, and without historical reference. This is worthy of consideration, as is the style. There are a number of fabrics showing Heraclius; why the abstract treatment here? The subject matter fits the abstract style. The Vienna piece, completely un-antique, which also ignores the method of representing human figures in the late antique, inclines one to think that a Copt wove it. This is also suggested by the fact that stylized figures of this kind often appear on textiles of the Islamic period, that is to say, at a time when the Greeks no longer played any part in Egyptian textile production. Looking at this representation, one is involuntarily also reminded of the human image found in Coptic sculpture, and the consciously unnaturalistic approach we found



there. But with regard to Heraclius' policy towards Egypt, a Copt could not have represented this emperor as the triumphant conqueror of the empire's enemies and the ruler of the world, sanctified by God; after all, the Copts had fought on the side of the Sassanians when they invaded the Nile Valley. So the weaver omitted all reference to the victory over the Persians, stripped the emperor of his personality, and created a horseman related to the mounted saints, not acknowledging the hated oppressor, the heretical Greek, the persecutor of the Monophysites. It is utterly remote from Greek works, and also from those of the late period, such as the two pieces in the Victoria and Albert Museum. This mounted emperor has no longer anything in common with the elegant galloping youth of the purple weaving, or with the slayer of the serpent, or with the coarse young rider on the polychrome panel in London, and nothing in common with the style, and little in common with the iconography of the Heraclius material. This decorative panel is unmistakably Coptic and shows us what alterations the Coptic weavers made when they took over a Hellenistic or early Byzantine theme. The youth in the Victoria and Albert Museum and the emperor in Vienna represent extreme opposites in the work of the early seventh century. They are both products of a folk art, the Greek piece is not an example of the most ambitious work, either, but they are nevertheless incompatible in form and spirit. In contrast, what the weavers working on the highest level were capable of is shown, not only by the magnificent wall-hangings of the time of Heraclius, but also by some decorative panels, from which we select a roundel from the Brooklyn

*Plate 127* Museum among a collection put together by Beckwith. It most probably shows Pasiphae with the bull and a servant with a wine jar and drinking vessel. The wife of Minos, naked except for a little cloak that flutters between her legs, kisses the bull, which was allowed by Poseidon to rise from the sea to assure the rule of Minos, who then refused to fulfil his promise to sacrifice it to the god. The Minotaur was the offspring of Pasiphae and the bull. This ancient myth is somewhat frivolously rendered here, which is underlined not so much by the kiss as by the offering of wine by the servant. On an ivory tablet, now in the Museum at Trieste, which is connected with the pulpit in Aachen, Europa kisses the bull in a similar manner; compared with the reliefs of Leda from Ahnas this is an almost restrained rendering of the relationship. The artistic form of this trimming is not of the same high quality as the great wall-hangings. The workshop in which it was woven was less elegant and it stands nearer to folk art of a Greek kind than to the textile art inspired by the imperial court of the ambitious workshop that produced the wall-hangings. If one observes the back of the nude, however, one sees a considerable skill in adapting antique prototypes to the techniques of wool-weaving. Thereby this relatively modest little work ranges itself side by side with the art of the Heraclian renaissance, with its predominantly mythological themes, which we know from the magnificent works of the silversmiths of Constantinople. For our purpose, what is decisive here is that subject matter and form show a basic contrast to the Vienna panel with the mounted emperor, which is still more marked and significant than in the rider of the Victoria and Albert



Museum. Shortly before the Arab conquest of the country put an end to the Egyptian late antique, the artistic spirit of Greek and Copt stand side by side for the last time. The examples chosen here show not only the deep gulf between the people, who after centuries of oppression were seeking their own medieval-like way to an art in which they might express themselves, but also the ruling classes, living by the ancient cultural heritage from which they had shut out the Copts, were still able to produce new forms of art, charming in its own way. The examples show at the same time that at least in textile art the Greek world in Egypt was in no sense yet stifled by the Coptic world and at an

XX Nereid and sea monster. Wool weaving on linen, trimming





end, when the disaster of the Arab conquest befell the country. The return to the antique had been carried through in the most important textile centres of Egypt with the renaissance of the time of Heraclius, as it had been in the imperial capital itself. It gave a new impetus that promised much, but which was suddenly broken off by the expulsion of the Greeks. At the same time, pieces of this kind make it clear how dangerous it is to class all the products of the textile industry in Egypt together as 'Coptic', and to date them by their distance from the antique in form and subject. Where possible, the Greek textile industry followed the changing fashions of imperial art. In contrast, the Copts, when they took a motif from the Greek world, translated it into their own formulae and their own spiritual sphere. They took over only the weaving technique. Perhaps at one time the Copts, as unskilled workers, had observed and copied their Greek employers, but they did not take over Greek form in this sphere any more than in any other. Here, also, two completely incompatible worlds face one another, and it will be a task for research to separate them, using Beckwith's results as a basis, and to classify the wealth of materials.

Not all that we know from the wide sphere of late Greek decorative panels has the artistic quality, and the joyous readiness to make use of Greek myth, of the little roundel in the Brooklyn Museum. It, and its fellows brought together by Beckwith, are undoubtedly in the highest category. The majority of the remaining examples, including polychrome pieces, are feebler in style as well as in invention. There are numerous panels which show single heads as their main decoration, in the tradition of mythological woven works. We illustrate a piece which was recently offered on the art market. It shows a round medallion placed upon a square. From the centre of the sides of this inner square, four bands extend to the edges of an outer square, so that something like a cross with a superimposed medallion appears as the basic structure of the design. The medallion shows a plump-cheeked youth, wearing a *chlamys* (Greek cloak), and a Phrygian cap on his curly hair. One would not be mistaken in seeing in this youth, far from god-like though he looks, the saviour-god Mithras, whose cult had been brought by the army from Persia to the further corners of the empire. This god of light was always represented with long curly hair and a Phrygian cap. Whether his appearance here is still an avowal of faith in his mysteries, must be left undecided. Perhaps it is only a decorative, not a religious, image. In each of the arms of the cross above and below a lion is depicted, and in the side arms there are other animals which cannot be identified. All four animals wear a harness with red straps round the neck and body. The squares at each corner show three red flowers. The range of colours is very limited; black, a dark blue, brick-red and ochre are the shades used. The drawing is not less limited, particularly in the face of Mithras, only the most important lines are summarily indicated, the curly hair is reduced to a row of ochre hooks on a dark ground. The face gives a really blank impression, and no attempt is made at any modelling. The animals in the arms of the cross are placed heraldically; their remarkable harness has a distant resemblance to Sassanian examples.



131 Scenes from the story  
of Joseph. Trimming

132 Hestia Polyolbos with  
personifications and putti.  
Wall-hanging









The panel is, all in all, a pretty average little piece of mass production, but certainly more typical of the ordinary decoration of a tunic than the few outstanding pieces. It may be dated to the fifth century; no more precise dating can be given. It certainly comes from a Greek workshop, since the theme itself excludes the possibility that it was made by Copts for we know nothing of any Coptic cult of this Persian god.

Considerably more interesting and amusing, too, are some remains of *clavi* with mythological figures — we will not discuss here the many with purely foliate or abstract decoration. The Museum of Fine Arts in Boston possesses the fragment of a tunic with *clavi* of this kind; larger fragments of the same tunic are in the Egyptian Staatssammlung in Munich. The *clavi* are divided into compartments of unequal lengths, of which three remain on the Boston piece. One of them shows a very lightly clothed lady whose companion figure is in Munich. She appears to be seated, but her raised arms and the castanets rather suggest that she is dancing. She wears close fitting trousers that cover only her thighs, and on both sides, striped borders are pulled up to the waist, where they bend outwards and end decoratively in half-palmettes. The upper part of the body appears to be clothed in a transparent shift, and is heavily decked with jewellery. In the left-hand bottom corner a naked *putto* is flying, with his arms stretched out to the dancer. Three Greek letters without meaning, are placed above him. The background is red, the naked parts of the body are flesh coloured, the trousers green with variegated crescent-shaped decorations; other colours introduced are light-blue and ochre. Considerably more colours are used than in the Mithras piece. What this frivolous lady with the large nimbus round her head is intended to be or represent, must remain undecided. Her clothing is reminiscent of an Indian dancer. We have already seen Indian influences elsewhere in certain poses, and in view of the active trade relationships, they are not surprising. The strongly abstract treatment in the drawing is very characteristic and shows not only, nor indeed principally, in the unnatural pose, but primarily in the details. The manner in which the breast and the lower part of the body are rendered, and the feet and arms formed, as also the face with the large eyes under comb-like brows, the nose formed with small feeble strokes, the small red mouth and patches of rouge on the cheeks, are evidence of a folk art-like style. This style disowns any real feeling for form and makes all details merely decorative, in a manner which is fundamentally a long way from the antique, Hellenism and the late antique styles. How strong the trend towards decoration is, can be seen in one detail; the trousers were certainly very finely folded in the prototype, as is found in Indian sculpture; here the folds have become half-moon shaped decorations that look no more than a pattern. The figure is entirely two-dimensional and there is no attempt to represent the body as something solid, it is itself more like an ornament than the picture of a human being.

Plate XXII

The picture on other parts of the *clavi* is surprisingly different. *Putti* and a centaur romp on a bright blue background. Above the dancer we see a *putto* with a four-footed animal, in a fragmentary state, and only identifiable from the Munich fragment. Beneath



is a *putto* fishing; a fish has just bitten. Beneath him two of his companions are also fishing in a canoe; one is paddling and the other draws the catch on board. All kinds of sea animals, shells, fish, etc., fill in the gaps in the design. The figures on the red background of the other *clavus* are almost completely destroyed. On the blue background we see a centaur with a nimbus blowing a syrinx surrounded by sea-beasts — he appears to have gone a little astray, lost in his music — and underneath are *putti* fishing. There is no question that the little company originated in the ancient Graeco-Egyptian motifs of the Nile landscape. The centaur, as well as the *putto* measuring his strength against an animal, is an invention of Hellenistic art. The merry throng is still quite classical in manner and spirit. It is true that in form it cannot be so regarded. The bodies are very badly drawn, the *putti* inclined to be spongy, with rubbery joints. The faces are mask-like, similar to that of the dancer, and the lower parts of the faces especially, are badly spoilt. The *horror vacui*, shown in the filling in of the space between the figures, makes it clear that the weaver did not think of leaving out the old motifs of the Nile landscape from the design, but that he made use of individual motifs together with decorative devices to fill in the space to achieve a decorative effect rather than a picture. Thus it is not surprising that the design on the stripes that border the divisions on both sides is the most clearly and beautifully formed. These change with the divisions. Beside the dancer we see a regular row of palmettes, divided at the bottom, alternating with lilies, in delicate colours on a black ground; at the edge of the damaged second division with the red background can be seen a thin, very regular wavy tendril with green and yellowish-brown ivy leaves on a violet ground, and next to the division with the blue background, a similar white wavy tendril with heart-shaped leaves on a red ground. These designs show where the real skill of the weaver lay, and he therefore naturally subordinated the figure decoration to them.

In view of this kind of workmanship one must ask oneself whether it is perhaps a Coptic product, since the style is so un-antique, decorative, two-dimensional and abstract. But it does not appear very likely that a Copt would have copied a theme of this kind from the Greeks in order to use it for his Christian fellow countrymen. It is more probable that this is the product of a Greek workshop in the hinterland, which had been subjected to the process of becoming Coptic — the process, evidence of which we have already found in numerous examples, and which can be explained by the slow repression of the Greek world and its economic decline. This workshop has taken nothing stylistically from the great Alexandrian tradition, rather it has translated the trusted old themes of the Egyptian Greek world into the formulae of a genuine, colourful and decorative folk art. The result is not lacking in charm, if one does not judge it by classical art, but regards it as an attractive witness to a living and joyful folk art. This charm lies especially in the carefree way in which the different motifs are used, the tasteful and skilful use of colour, and the gathering together of so much that is heterogeneous into an effective whole. The date can only be guessed at. It can hardly be placed before the late fifth century;





XXI Youth with a Phrygian cap. Wool weaving on linen, trimming

the form of the *putti's* bodies suggests the late sixth century, since they are very reminiscent of forms that we find on the ivory reliefs in Aachen Cathedral.

A fragment of a *clavus* in the Victoria and Albert Museum carries us a step further towards an abstract rendering of the body. Here, too, we see naked, wingless figures floating between all kinds of animals, struggling with them or among themselves. Here, however, the disintegration of the forms — or the new interpretation of them — has

Plate 108



progressed so far that it is almost impossible to make out what most of the individual motifs are intended to represent. The drawing has become very hard and angular. Particularly characteristic is the floating figure in the middle of the fragment, above a creature half-deer and half-fish or shell, with outstretched arms and a cloak billowing out over its head. The pose and hair suggest that it is meant to be a goddess; but the breast is drawn almost like a primitive mask, the lower part of the torso is shown as a Y, and the left leg divided by diagonal lines; the face, with the pointed chin, is indicated only by a broken U, with circles meant for eyes; the mis-shapen arms are too long and hands look like claws. All the other figures have a similar appearance, and the animals can hardly be recognized. This can no longer be explained as a transformation of forms in the manner of folk art. It is simply inferior, cheap mass production, made hastily and uncaringly, without any artistic ambition or values. Numerous pieces of this kind survive and they show that trash was known in the late antique in Egypt, which attempted to follow the finer works in theme, but because of lack of artistic and technical skill in the maker, remained of poor quality, in spite of being colourful and varied.

Plate 131

One should not class wretched pieces of work of this kind with others, equally colourful and equally unsuccessful in representing human forms, which were made in quite another spirit. We take for example, an oval panel from the Hermitage in Leningrad. It shows, in a central oval medallion, the sleeping Joseph, dreaming that the stars bow down to him (*Genesis* 37, 9 — even the eleven stars mentioned in the text are all shown). All around, other events in the story of Joseph are shown. On the right we see Joseph being thrown into the well by one of his brothers. Clockwise, there follows Joseph conversing with his brother, Joseph being sold to a Midianite, Joseph in front of the well, the Midianite riding, Joseph behind him on his horse craning back, arms out-stretched, the Midianite selling Joseph to Potiphar's wife, and a brother of Joseph's bringing the bloodstained robe to his parents. The scenes are not separated from each other; only the pose of the figures links them and divides them from their neighbours. They are not placed in the correct order; the scene on the lower right-hand side in which Joseph relates his dream to his brother should follow the central picture, and after that it should continue to the right with the casting into the well, but instead it jumps to the lower left-hand side with Joseph in front of the well and then again to the right with the sale; then upwards, on the left-hand side, the ride and further sale; the topmost scene is only indirectly concerned with Joseph. It is not continuous as on a Roman frieze or an illustrated scroll; the episodes are somewhat jumbled up; perhaps the weaver had a prototype in front of him, most likely book illustration, which now and again had joined two scenes together. We know of this kind of book illustration from late antique Codices, for example, the fragments of a *Genesis* manuscript, now in Vienna, written in purple. It is not surprising that it was Joseph whose story has here and elsewhere been chosen as a subject, if one remembers that this patriarch was especially revered in Egypt and that his feast in Alexandria had taken the place of the pagan Greek Adonis festival. Furthermore Joseph was



considered in the Biblical interpretations of the ancient Church to be a forerunner of Christ; for example, the burial of Christ was seen as a parallel to Joseph being thrown into the well by his brothers. This piece can therefore quite certainly be taken to be Christian.

The figures on this panel are very cramped, with over-large heads and faces, delineated in a few strokes, from which giant eyes stare. The folds of the robes are indicated with few strokes that are not unskilful, in spite of a definite parallel treatment. The movements are not altogether badly observed, for example, in the way in which Joseph stands before the well, or his imploring gesture as the Midianite rides off with him. Altogether the gestures are lively. The clothing and skin colouring is precisely differentiated: the weaver obviously knew the roving, thieving Bedouin of his time very well, since he represented his Midianite as one. The whole has an air of primitive but child-like joy in story-telling, lively, and clearly reminiscent of folk art. The decoration in the two surrounds is finely and clearly formed, though very abstract. This kind of folk art is of a different nature from that which we see on the fragments of tunics in Boston and Munich. It does not originate in the transformation and misunderstanding of the original Hellenistic form, but is rooted in the joy of simply illustrating the Biblical stories from the Old Testament especially favoured by the Christian Copts because they concerned their own homeland. If we look at the figures here we can see that they have nothing in common with the little *putti* of the tunic fragments, which in the rendering of the faces are related to the figures in the corners of the trimming showing the mounted emperor now in Vienna. This gives us two hints on the classification of this piece and all its numerous fellows. Once and for all this trimming can be characterized as Coptic in the narrower sense of the word. It shows that, in contrast to the Greeks on the Nile, the Copts took themes for the decoration of their clothing from Biblical stories, probably because Greek mythology was as strange to their culture as it was hated because of its origin. Naturally they made use of other themes, secular though not mythological, which appear in this group. This piece may well be dated, as is the above-mentioned, to the seventh century. This is logical enough, since the fragments of an Alexandrian chronicle, now in Moscow, with figures which are not dissimilar, is today dated to the seventh century.

If we compare this panel with the one in the Brooklyn Museum showing Pasiphae and the bull, a piece of about the same date, the deep gulf between the two styles of living folk art on the Nile, the Greek and the Coptic, can be seen. On the one hand the erotic mythology, based on antique models, none too ambitious artistically; on the other, simple representation of the Biblical stories in a characteristic style, foreign to classical art and indifferent to the way in which it represented humanity. On the one side a scene characteristic of the whole of mythology, the queen kissing the bull, on the other a series of concise illustrative scenes. In one case, there is joy in depicting form in the classical manner, in the other, pleasure in a devout subject. In one case we have, considering the

Plate 127



religious circumstances of the time, mythology brought back as a motif for ornament; in the other, exhibited almost as a confession of faith, the events which befell the Chosen People in the Copts' own homeland, linked with Christ by theologians. Two worlds appear before us simultaneously in one country, side by side and interwoven with each other, yet deeply and basically foreign to each other and remaining so. In this period, the Greeks, influenced by a short renaissance originating in Constantinople, once more freed themselves in their best work from Coptic influence, which had previously threatened to choke the artistic spirit of the Egyptian Greeks. Coptic art went its own way towards the Middle Ages without looking back at the other, the art of the hated rulers. Here lies the essential difference: the Greek trimming mentioned above is the product of an artistic spirit that looks back because it can see no way ahead; in contrast the Coptic looks to the future; the Ethiopians for example learnt from this kind of Coptic style.

Plate 128

One more piece should be mentioned, also Christian, a fragment in the Victoria and Albert Museum. It is possibly the remains of a *stola*. Under the little that remains of a vine branch, a leaf and the bottom of a bunch of grapes, are two doves in two differently coloured spaces, one above the other, the upper turned to the right, the lower turned to the left. Beneath them stands a cross upon a little rod rising out of an orb; on the points of the cross little circles are shown. The two side arms are linked to the upper part of the stem by small chains. At the centre of the cross and oval medallion a head is shown delineated in a few strokes and at the foot are two creatures, apparently a bird and a fish, which look at the cross and appear to kiss it. The style of this fragment is different from that of the trimmings we have mentioned above, but the conscious reduction of forms, the simple and almost childish clarity of the drawing and the strong lines, are nevertheless in accordance with them. The piece is of about the same date as the panel in Leningrad. This is shown by the cross with the medallion, in which only Christ can be represented: crosses of this kind, with medallions of Christ superimposed, are known to us from the middle of the sixth century (Sant' Apollinare in Classe in Ravenna) and the end of it (Palestinian oil flask in Bobbio sent by Pope Gregory to the Lombard Queen Theodelinda). The Coptic weaver apparently here followed a model from the Holy Land, of which there was already evidence in the seventh century in Coptic monastic settlements showing that there were close connections between the Coptic Church and Palestine Meinardus. This fragment does not in theme and style quite fall into the usual category of Coptic weaving, not to mention Greek. It is amongst the oldest of the surviving liturgical robes which we possess. Its sparse, restrained but richly symbolic decoration lets us see at least something of this kind of Coptic textile art (by far the greater part of what we have in *stolae* and other remains of liturgical robes of Coptic origin dates from Islamic times, and is not woven but embroidered). The symbolism is not unique, but taken from the rich stores of ancient Christian art. The large doves probably represent the Apostles, the vine branch with the grapes is an indication of the relationship between Christ and His Church (*John 15, 5*), the cross with the picture medallion represents Christ the crucified



KII Dancer, with putti  
struggling with an  
animal, and fishing.  
Fragment of the clavi  
of a tunic (detail)









Lord of the Church, and finally, the dove and the fish at His feet are ancient symbols for Christendom.

What we have mentioned here is a small cross-section of the enormous amount of surviving material, selected to show the potentialities and contrasts of late antique textile art in Egypt. Besides a multitude of inferior, mass-produced work, there is much that is very charming, and gives us an insight into the way of life of the two peoples in the Nile Valley and into the development of their decorative art. We shall find no more lively and colourful evidence than this.

## S U M M A R Y

From various examples we have attempted to make clear the nature of our heritage of late antique art from Egypt. We have been obliged to recognize that that which is usually known as 'Coptic Art' is no unified whole, but is divided into two independent branches, a provincial Greek and a Coptic, belonging to two different peoples with distinctive cultural potentialities and traditions. Further, we have seen that the Greek late antique on the Nile shows no unified development, but is in its turn divided into different local streams of which we can see some, at least more clearly than others. In the sixth century the two main divisions were influenced by early Byzantine art, and the artistic movements throughout the Empire were followed, to a certain extent, in the principal workshop in Egypt. Finally, we have seen that surviving works of both kinds are to be considered as great art only in a very few cases, and as 'official art' only in exceptional cases, probably commissioned by the State. The majority of what survives belongs to the sphere of folk art, and is largely free from the influences of great art. We have been able to see the stunting and degeneration of Greek folk art and the development and growth of the Coptic. We may conclude here.

What we have attempted to classify was not restricted to the country of its origin. We have been obliged to note to what extent, for example, the products of the textile industry were destined for export beyond the borders of the province. There was also a lively export trade in other products, so that we know of almost more late antique Egyptian bronze vessels from outside Egypt than from Egypt itself. It is not remarkable therefore, that 'Coptic Art', this structure of manifold and bewildering diversity, and of a duality imposed upon it by historical and sociological factors, has had a world-wide influence. Not only did it link antique and late antique art in Egypt with that of the Arab conquerors, as can be best seen in the continuing textile industry (K. A. C. Creswell has also shown that there were strong influences in architectural sculpture, to name here only the most important) — but there was also a long-range effect which one could only expect to see in the regions of the Empire to which Egypt exported her art forms as well as her grain.



Once more we must recollect that materials from Egypt, which were not necessarily chiefly bales of cloth, but ready-made clothing, were sent everywhere in the Empire for the use of the Roman army. Thus the patterns used for decoration, purely abstract as well as figurative, came to the provinces belonging to the sphere of the German states, and were used by numerous Germans who served in the Roman army as soldiers or *confederates*. As W. Holmqvist has shown in his very thorough and convincing study, there were two predominant motifs, which he has followed up in Frankish works; the knot motif which we have seen in two examples in Berlin, and the horseman slaying a monster with his lance. Both themes have inspired the liveliest of Frankish art. They do not come from the Coptic sphere but rather from the Greek late classical sphere of 'Coptic Art'. We can thus see that the late classical provincial art of the Greeks on the Nile had a direct influence on the artistic development of a Germanic people, whose art was the basis of German art. Coptic materials and vessels were apparently popular imports into the parts of Germany outside the Empire. From these the Franks could take over what they wanted in the way of motifs. Their own art, exclusively concerned with decoration, found in the modest products of this Egyptian industry the simplification of human and animal forms which it was able to copy.

But the influences from Egypt extended still further. In Ireland, at the other side of the known world, a monastic Church grew up, in organization and structure completely independent of Rome and Constantinople, the great Mediterranean centres. In their missals we find, among the saints they honoured or prayed to, the names of certain Coptic monks. Today they are still revered there, otherwise they would be unknown. From this we can see that there must have been close links between the two widely distant Churches, the essential spirit of both of which was decided by the predominance of monasticism. We know as little of how these links began as how long they existed, but they have left visible traces behind them. We find an unmistakable and astonishing relationship between many Christian works in Ireland and Egypt. This can be most clearly seen by comparing the relief of the mounted Christ from Der Amba Schenoute with Irish manuscript paintings. They are linked by the decorative and stylized manner, with its completely unnatural forms, of showing the robes in parallel stripes which also appear as purely linear in stone reliefs. Further, the singular depiction of the faces is very similar to what we find, for example, in the *Book of Kells*, one of the most beautiful examples of Irish manuscript art, probably of the eighth century. The ecclesiastical connection demonstrates that we are not dealing with a chance phenomenon, nor with a parallel development without a mutual connection, such as is so often seen in the world-wide sphere of primitive art. This relationship must be attributed to direct contact. Obviously there was not only the ecclesiastical link which is shown by the names of Coptic monks in the Irish missals, but also a cultural influence by the Coptic Church. It does not matter whether one imagines that Coptic visitors to Ireland had brought handicrafts from their homeland with them as presents, or whether they shared with their



Irish brothers the basic elements of their own artistic creativity. Direct artistic connections, investigated especially by P. Paulsen, cannot be denied. Coptic influence developed in Irish art, and from thence went over once again into the developing German art. The Irish Church provided its wandering monks, always zealous missionaries, not only with the joyful tidings but also with the artistic spirit of the native Church. Everywhere they settled, these Irish envoys employed themselves in spreading their art, and with it the indirect Coptic influences; the most important example is St Gallen where the manuscript paintings are pure Irish in origin. Thus the Irish Church handed on to the developing art of the new peoples who appeared in the Christian world what they had themselves received from the Coptic east.

It should also be mentioned that Ethiopian art, like the Ethiopian Church, was inspired by Egypt and influenced from thence until modern times. Thus the late antique art of Egypt in its two main forms was a centre from which influences spread to the world outside the borders of the Roman Empire. In this lies its greatest significance and its historical importance. It stands out from the great number of other provincial art styles of the late antique. The late archaic manner of Greek provincial art and the genuine archaism of Coptic art made it possible for all this to happen. The archaic manner of the provincial Greek style was primarily, before it found its own form, doubtless a relapse into the primitive ways of Hellenistic art, which, as it slowly became weaker, just managed to exist a little longer in Alexandria. It reduced the stylistic heritage of the antique to such simple formulae that the peoples who took possession of the Roman Empire could take them over without difficulty and make them their own, although portrayal of the human form was foreign to them. The archaism of Coptic art took over the formulae as a result of historical synchronism, although it was individual and independent of the antique style, even divergent from it. The rich decorative forms of the two branches of late antique art in Egypt, however, came up against the artistic fervour of the Celts and Germans of Western Europe, with their own highly developed folk art based upon decoration. Here folk art came into contact with folk art, and these influenced each other in the same way as they were influenced by the dying antique mode and formed an entity in the awakening Europe.





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Alexandria

Naukratis

Terenuthis

Babylon

Memphis

Arsinoe

FAIYUM

Herakleopolis  
Magna

SINAI

Hermopolis  
Magna

Antinoe

RED

SEA

Panopolis

Ptolemais

Hermonthis

Thebes

Latopolis

Apollinopolis  
Magna

Kharga Oasis

IMPORTANT GREEK  
CENTRES IN EGYPT

Syene





MEDITERRANEAN

Alexandria

Der Abu Mina

El Tarrana

Giza • Cairo

Saqqara

Medinet el Faiyum

FAIYUM

Ahnas

Der Amba Antonios

Der Amba Bola

SINAI

El Ashmunein

Sheikh Abada

Der Amba Apollo

Der Abu Hennis

Bawit

RED

SEA

Achmim

Sohag

Der Amba Schenoute

Dendera

Luxor

Armant

Esna

Edfu

Kharga Oasis

IMPORTANT COPTIC  
SITES IN EGYPT

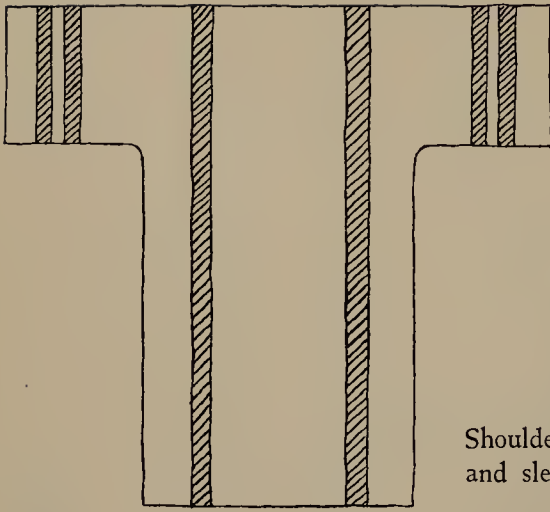
Der Amba Saman

Aswan

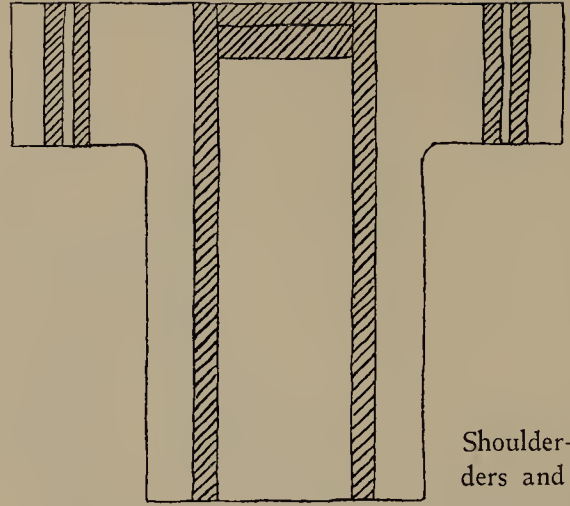
Philae



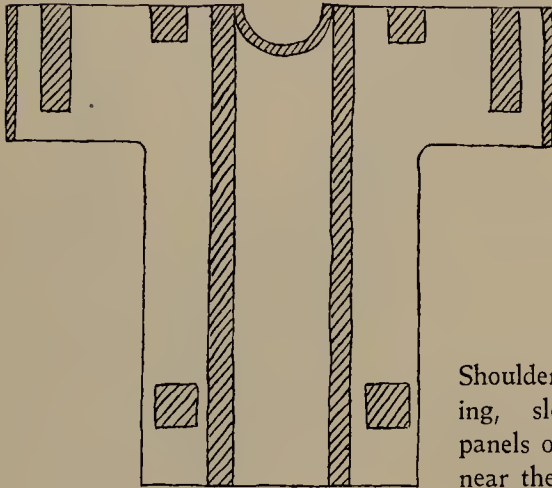
# ORNAMENTATION OF COPTIC TUNICS



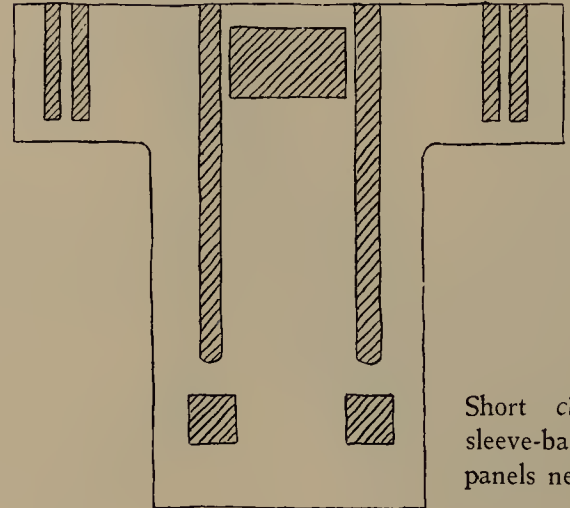
Shoulder-bands (*lavi*)  
and sleeve-bands



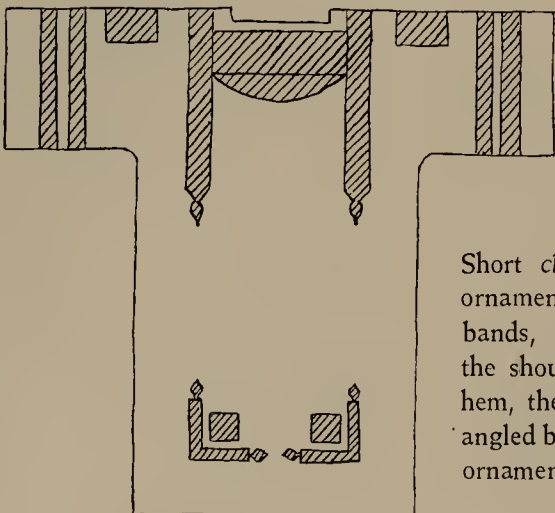
Shoulder-bands, neck b  
ders and sleeve-bands



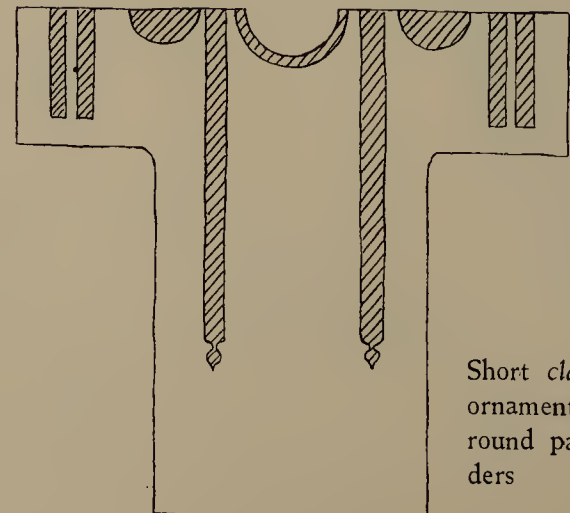
Shoulder-bands, neck edging,  
sleeve-bands, square  
panels on the shoulders and  
near the hem



Short *clavi*, chest pa  
sleeve-bands, and squ  
panels near the hem

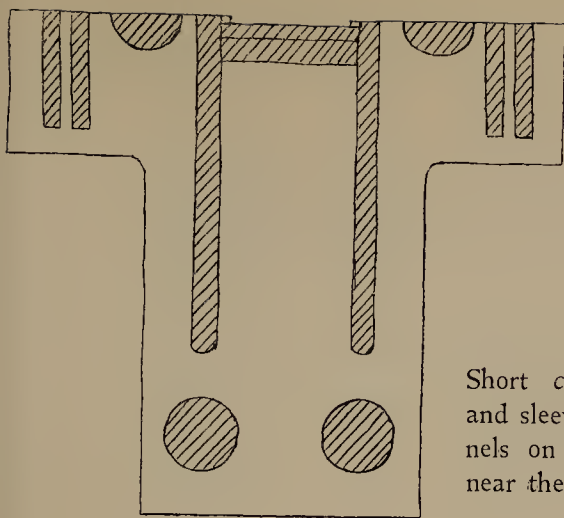


Short *clavi*, ending in leaf  
ornaments, chest panel, sleeve-  
bands, square panels on  
the shoulders, and near the  
hem, the latter set in right-  
angled bands ending in leaf-  
ornaments (*gammulae*)

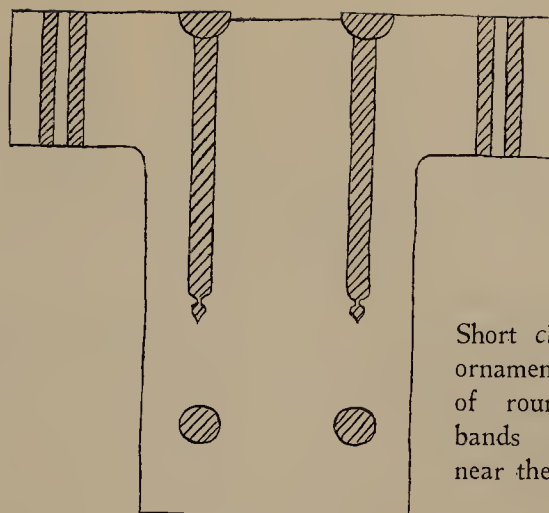


Short *clavi*, ending in  
ornaments, sleeve-bands  
round panels on the sho  
lders

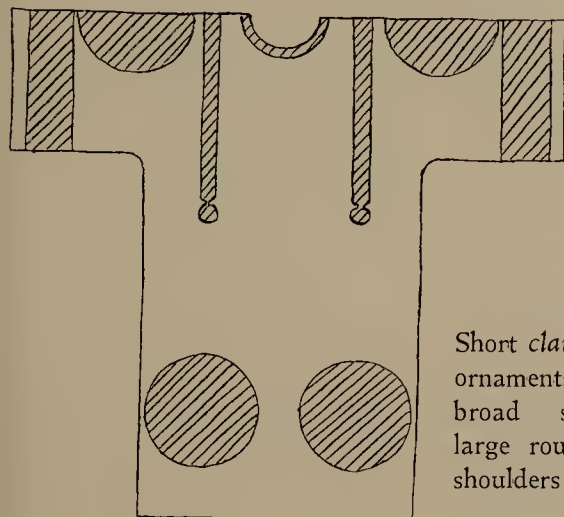




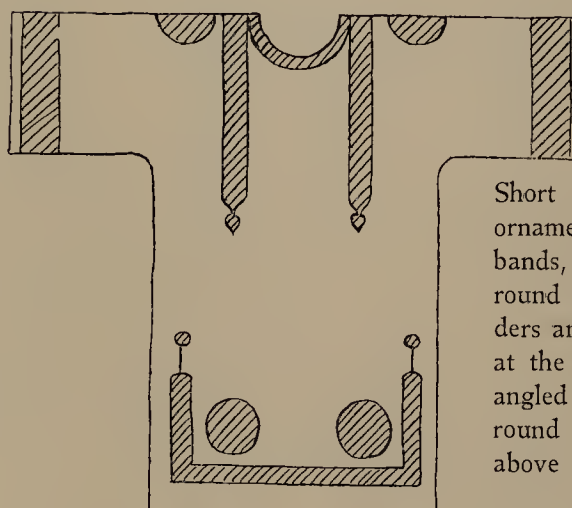
Short *clavi*, neck borders and sleeve-bands, round panels on the shoulders and near the hem



Short *clavi*, ending in leaf ornaments and coming out of round panels, sleeve-bands and round panels near the hem



Short *clavi*, ending in round ornaments, neck edging, broad sleeve-bands and large round panels on the shoulders and near the hem



Short *clavi*, ending in leaf ornaments, broad sleeve-bands, round neck edging, round panels on the shoulders and near the hem, also at the hem a double right-angled band with little round circles on thin stems above



Servant in a short tunic, holding his master's cloak, (after wall-paintings in Silistra, Bulgaria)



Nobleman in tunic and chlamys, (after wall-paintings in Silistra, Bulgaria)



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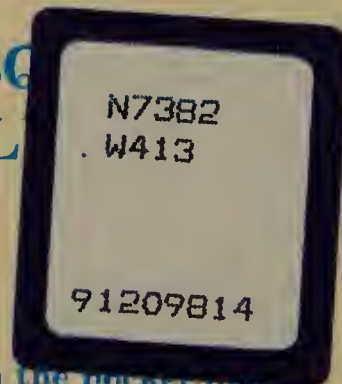


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Until 1958, Klaus Wessel was professor of Christian archaeology and ecclesiastical art as well as church history at the University of Greifswald, Germany. At the same time, he was guest professor of early Christian and East European art history at the University of Berlin, and Director of the Early Christian-Byzantine collection of the State Museums in Berlin, which contains the most important German collection of Coptic material. Since 1959, he has been professor of early Christian and Byzantine art at the University of Munich.



